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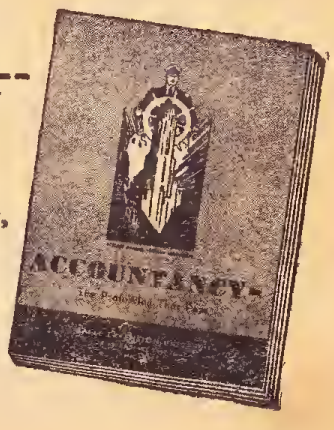

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Vol. XXX, No. 1 | A THRILLING PUBLICATION | April, 1947

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A Department Conducted by THE EDITOR

WHAT with Bell completing rocket planes designed to hit a top speed of 1,700 miles per hour, with coffee coming in compressed cakes like bouillon cubes and machines without feelings replacing cotton sharecroppers with same, science is coming on apace in fields other than nuclear physics. And writers of science fiction are really having a heck of a time remaining ahead of the field.

One of the most arresting and significant of all the new gadgets to turn up in the news, however, was the artificial snowstorm described in a recent report of General Electric Corporation. This is something to ponder over during both long winter and short summer nights.

After discovery that dry ice pellets, under certain atmospheric conditions, could produce snowflakes in the laboratory, GE technicians put their discovery to a field test. When meteorologists reported a large cloud over Mount Greylock in the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts, they took off in a plane loaded with the frozen carbon dioxide formerly used only to keep ice cream and other perishable foods sufficiently gelid.

Aloft, they sprayed that cloud, which was some three miles in length, with the pellets. The result was one very local and very early-season snowstorm. It was finally decided that one pellet, about the size of a pea, could produce several tons of snow in passing through such a cloud.

Climate Control in Reverse

This is the long-awaited climate control in reverse—and with a vengeance. When Mark Twain complained that no one ever "did anything about" the weather, it is highly dubious he was thinking of making it worse. Granted reasonably chilly winter weather, what the Chamber of Commerce of, say, Louisville could do to Cincinnati or Dallas to Forth Worth or vice versa is appalling to consider!

Just a plane and some dry ice ground up in a hamburger machine could create any number of local Siberias. Now if the GE scientists can come up with as simple a means for causing clouds to evaporate entirely, we could keep a couple of mountains under snow for skiers and let the rest of the world off scot free.

The possible military ramifications of the very real artificial snowstorm are equally appalling. A couple of bombers or even Piper Cubs equipped with dry ice could probably raise merry hob with a foe's communications and turn shock troops into snow shovelers for months at a time.

As a matter of fact, this reporter is in hearty favor of more and more horrible military devices, for reasons he will explain. It is, to say the least, highly improbable that we should retain sole control of the atomic bomb for long. And it will probably be a darned good thing for the world when everyone has it.

Deadly Vapors

Poison gas was the great terror weapon of World War One. When first introduced by the Germans against the Canadians at the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915, it threatened completely to disrupt the Allied battle line in Flanders. The Allies were quick to make their own and to give the Kaiser's legions a dose of the lung-destroying chemicals.

More and more deadly gases were invented

(Continued on page 8)

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THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

as were more and more effective means of propagating them in desired areas. By the time Germany invaded Poland in 1939 to start World War Two, every country had great stockpiles of deadly vapors and could turn out masks in dime-store profusion.

But, except for some isolated instances in Ethopia and China where the Italians and Japanese employeed the stuff against defenseless people, no one turned poison gas loose. The reason, of course, was that all were vulnerable and all were supplied with the weapon. Its use would have amounted to military insanity. And contrary to pacifist opinion, military men are not usually bait for the bughouse.

With planes attaining round-the-world ranges so that no city anywhere is safe from any foe in the world, the use of the atom bomb will soon be even more ridiculous. No leader of any country has any desire to see his own cities vaporized and their populations destroyed—which is what will happen if he launches an atom bomb attack once the bomb is a universal possession.

The same limitation holds for biological or bacteriological warfare, that holy terror of the Sunday supplements. So let's have more and more horrible inventions. The more horrible the invention the more the threat of retaliation will ensure the peace the world so sadly needs to bind up its wounds.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

FOR ITS June appearance, THRILLING WONDER STORIES presents a trio of long stories which should give lovers of that pseudo-science known as scientifiction or, more briefly, as STF, a full meal of interesting and thought-provoking, to say nothing of exciting, reading material.

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(Continued on page 97)

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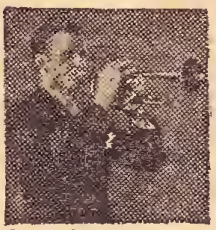

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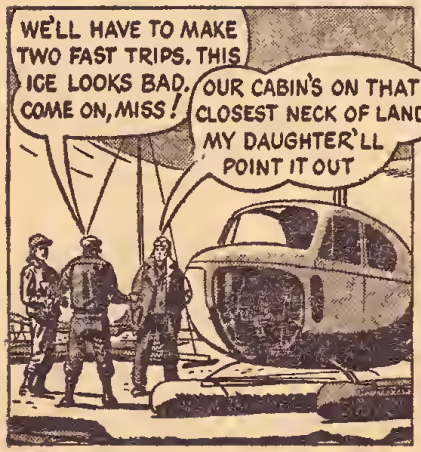

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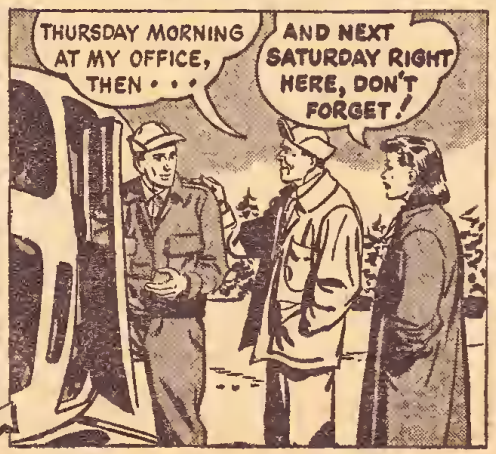

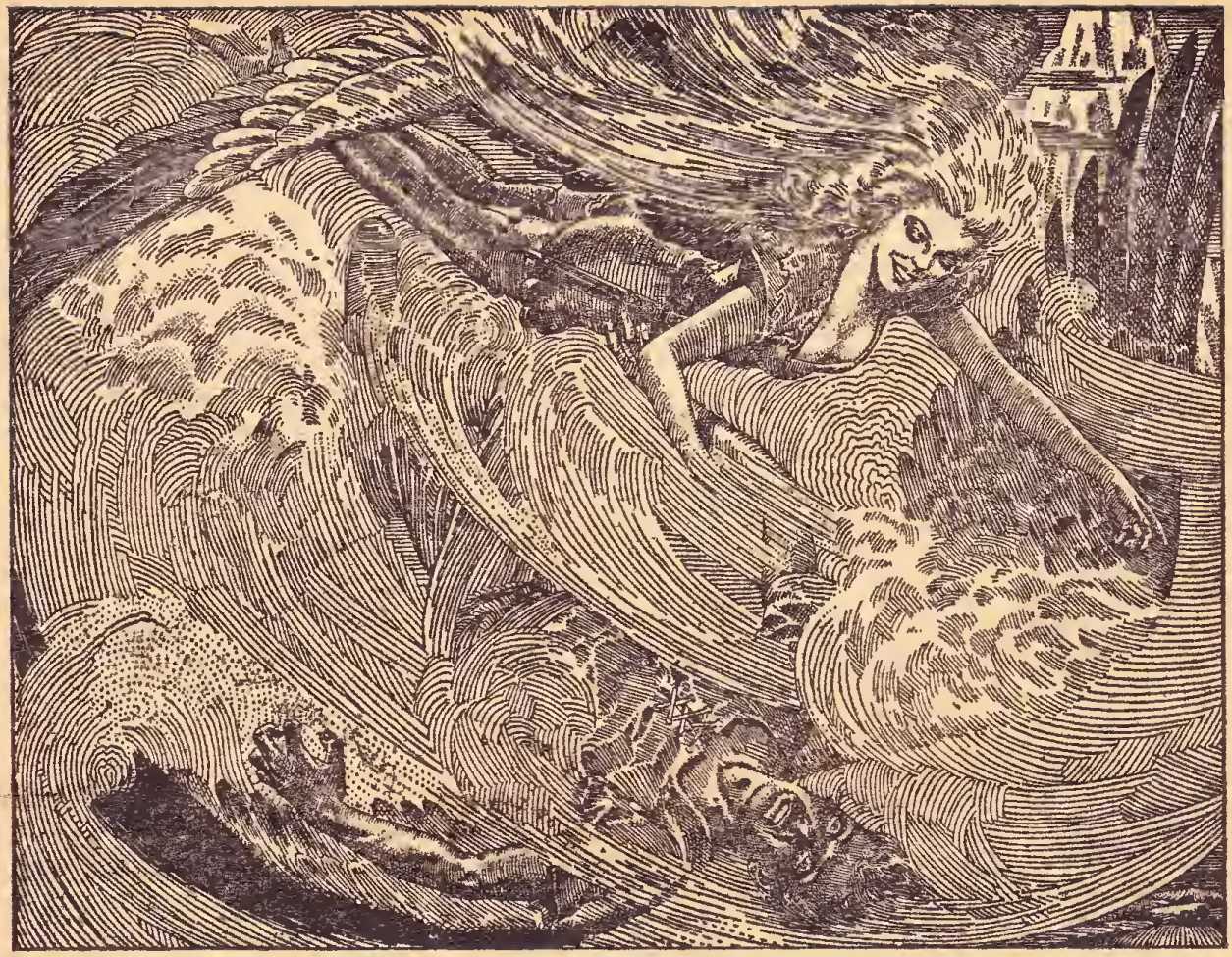

Together they glided across the rushing air currents (Chap. II)

WAY OF THE GODS

By HENRY KUTTNER

Spawn of atomic fission, this strange company of mutants exiled by humanity battles against enslavement in a foreign world dominated by the evil Spirit of the Crystal Mountain!

CHAPTER I

New Worlds

HE LOOKED at the October morning all about him as if he had never seen October before. That was not true, of course. But he knew that he would never see it again. Unless they had mornings, and Octobers—where he was going. It did not seem likely, though the old man had talked a great deal about key-patterns and the selectivity of the machine, and the multiple universes spinning like motes in a snowstorm through infinity.

"But I'm human!" he said aloud, sitting cross-legged on the warm brown earth and feeling the breeze which gave the lie instantly

A COMPLETE FANTASTIC NOVEL

to his thought. He felt the gentle pull at his shoulder-blades which meant that his wings were fluttered a little by the breeze, and instinctively he flexed the heavy bands of muscle across his chest to control the wing-surfaces.

He was not human. That was the trouble. And this world, this bright October world that stretched to the horizon around him was made to shelter the race that had become dominant, and was jealous of its dominion. Humanity, that had no place for strangers among its ranks.

The others did not seem to care very much. They had been reared in the creche almost from birth, under a special regime that isolated them from the humans. The old man had been responsible for that. He had built the huge house on the hillside, swooping curves of warmly-colored plastic that blended into the brown and green of the land—an asylum that had finally failed. The walls were breached.

"Kern," someone behind him said.

The winged man turned his head, glancing up past the dark curve of his wings. A girl came toward him down the slope from the house. Her name was Kua. Her parents had been Polynesian, and she had the height and the lithe grace of her Oceanic race, and the shining dark hair, the warm, honey-colored skin. But she wore opaque dark glasses, and across her forehead a band of dark plastic that looked opaque too, and was not. Beneath, her face was lovely, the red mouth generously curved, the features softly rounded like the features of all her race.

She was not human either.

"It's no use worrying, Kern," she said, smiling down at him. "It'll work out all right. You'll see."

"All right!" Kern snorted scornfully. "You think so, do you?"

Kua glanced instinctively around the hillside, making sure they were alone. Then she put both hands to her face and slipped off the glasses and the dark band from her forehead. Kern, meeting the gaze of her bright blue eye, was conscious again of the little shock he always felt when he looked into her uncovered face.

For Kua was a cyclops. She had one eye centered in her forehead. And she was—when the mind could accept her as she was, not as she should be—a beautiful woman in spite of it. That blue brilliance in the dusky face had a depth and luster beyond the eyes of humans. Heavy lashes ringed it, and the gaze could sink fathom upon fathom in her eye and never plumb its depths.

KUA'S eye was a perfect lens. Whatever lens can do, her eye could do. No one could be sure just what miraculous mechanisms existed beyond the blue surface, but she could see to a distance almost beyond the range of the ordinary telescope and she could focus down upon the microscopic. And there may have been other things the single eye could do. One did not question one's companions too closely in this house of the mutations.

"You've been with us two years, Kern," she was saying now. "Only two years. You don't know yet how strong we are, or how much we can accomplish among us. Bruce Hallam knows what he's doing, Kern. He never works on theories. Or if he does, the theories become truth. He has a mind like that. You don't know us, Kern!"

"You can't fight a whole world."

"No. But we can leave it." She smiled, and he knew she saw nothing of the golden morning all around them. She knew nothing, really, of the cities that dotted the world of 1980, or the lives that were so irrevocably alien to her. They should have been alien to Kern too, but not until he was eighteen had the wings begun to grow upon his shoulders.

"I don't know, Kua," he said. "I'm not sure I want to. I had a father and a mother—brothers—friends."

"Your parents are your greatest enemies," she told him flatly. "They gave you life."

He looked away from the penetrating stare of that great blue single eye and past her at the big plastic house. That had been asylum, after the massacre of 1967—asylum against the hordes bent on extirpating the freakish monsters created by atomic radiation. He could not remember, of course, but he had read about it, never guessing then that such a thing would ever apply to him. The old man had told him the story.

First had come the atomic war, brief, terrible, letting loose nameless radiations upon the world. And then had followed the wave upon wave of freak births among those exposed to it. Genes and chromosomes altered beyond comprehension. Monstrous things were born of human parents.

One in ten, perhaps, had been a successful mutation. And even those were dangerous to homo sapiens.

"Better to die that way than this," said Elja. "All right, Kern, we'll go." (Chap. VI)

Evolution is like a roulette wheel. The conditions of the earth favor certain types of mutation capable of survival. But atomic energies had upset the balance, and mutations spawned in sheer madness began to spread. Not many, of course. Not many were viable. But two-headed things were born—and lived—along with geniuses and madmen. World Council had studied the biological and social problem for a long time before it recommended euthanasia. Man's evolution had been planned and charted. It must not be allowed to swerve from the track, or chaos would be let loose.

Geniuses, mutant humans with abnormally high I.Q.'s, were allowed to survive. Of the others, none lived after they had been detected. Sometimes they were difficult to detect. By 1968 only the true-line mutations, faithful to the human biological norm, were alive—with certain exceptions.

SUCH as the old man's son, Sam Brewster. He was a freak, with a certain—talent. A superhuman talent. The old man had disobeyed the Government law, for he had not sent the infant to the labs for checking and testing—and annihilation. Instead, he had built this great house, and the boy had never gone far beyond its grounds.

Gradually then, partly to provide the youth with companionship, partly out of compassion, the father had begun to gather others together. Secretly, a mutant infant here, a mutant child there, he brought them in, until he had a family of freaks in the big plastic house. He had not taken them haphazardly. Some would not have been safe to live with. Some were better dead from the start. But those with something to offer beyond their freakishness, he found and sheltered.

It was the bringing in of Kern that gave the secret away. The boy had gone too long among ordinary humans, while his wings grew. He was eighteen, and his pinions had a six-foot spread, when old Mr. Brewster found him. His family had tried to keep him hidden, but the news was leaking out already when he left for the Brewster asylum, and in the years since it had spread until the authorities at last issued their ultimatum.

"It was my fault," Kern said bitterly. "If it hadn't been for me, you'd never have been molested."

"No." Kua's deep, luminous eye fixed his. "Sooner or later you know they'd have found us. Better let it happen now, while we're all still young and adaptable. We can go and enjoy going, now." Her voice shook a little with deep excitement. "Think of it, Kern! New worlds! Places beyond the earth, where there could be people like us!"

"But Kua, I'm human! I feel human. I don't want to leave. This is where I belong!"

"You say that because you grew up among normal people. Kern, you've got to face it. The only place for any of us is—somewhere away."

"I know." He grinned wryly. "But I don't have to like it. Well—we'd better go back. They'll have the ultimatum by now, I suppose. May as well hear it. I know what the answer is. Don't you?"

She nodded, watching his involuntary glance around the empty blue sky, the warm October hills. A world for humans. But for humans alone. . . .

Back in the Brewster plastic asylum, the inmates had assembled.

"There isn't much time," old Mr. Brewster said. "They're on their way here now, to take you all back for euthanasia."

Sam Brewster laughed harshly.

"We could show 'em a few tricks."

"No. You can't fight the whole world. You could kill many of them, but it wouldn't do any good. Bruce's machine is the only hope for you all." His voice broke a little. "It's going to be a lonely world for me, children, after you've gone."

They looked at him uncomfortably, this strange, unrelated family of freak mutations, scarcely more than the children he had called them, but matured beyond their years by their strange rearing.

"There are worlds beyond counting, as you know," Bruce said precisely. "Infinite numbers—worlds where we might not be freaks at all. Somewhere among them there must be places where each of our mutations is a norm. I've set the machine to the aggregate pattern of us all and it'll find our equivalents—something to suit one of us at least. And the others can go on looking. I can build the machine in duplicate on any world, anywhere, where I can live at all." He smiled, and his strange light eyes glowed.

It was curious, Kern thought, how frequently in mutations the eyes were the giveaway. Kua, of course. And Sam Brewster with his terrible veiled glance protected by its secondary lid which drew back only in anger. And Bruce Hallam, whose strangeness was not visible but existed only in the amaz-

ing intricacies of his brain, looked upon the alien world with eyes that mirrored the mysteries behind them.

Bruce knew machinery—call it machinery for lack of a more comprehensive word—with a knowledge that was beyond learning. He could produce miracles with any set of devices his fingers could contrive. He seemed to sense by sheer instinct the courses of infinite power, and harness them with the simplest ease, the simplest mechanics.

There was a steel cubicle in the corner of the room with a round steel door which had taken Bruce a week to set up. Over it a panel burned with changing light, flickering through the spectrum and halting now and then upon clear red. When it was red, then the—the world—upon which the steel door opened was a world suitable for the little family of mutations to enter. The red light meant it could support human life, that it paralleled roughly the world they already knew, and that something in its essential pattern duplicated the pattern of at least one of the mutant group.

Kern was dizzy when he thought of the sweep of universes past that door, world whirling upon world where no human life could dwell, worlds of gas and flame, worlds of ice and rock. And, one in a countless number, a world of sun and water like their own. . . .

IT WAS incredible. But so were the wings at his own back, so was Kua's cyclopean eye, and Sam Brewster's veiled gaze, and so was the brain in Bruce Hallam's skull, which had built a bridge for them all.

He glanced around the group. Sitting back against the wall, in shadow, Byrna, the last of the mutant family, lifted her gray gaze to his. Compassion touched him as always when he met her eyes.

Byrna was physically the most abnormal of them all, in her sheer smallness. She came scarcely to Kern's elbow when she was standing. She was proportioned perfectly in the scale of her size, delicate, fragile as something of glass. But she was not beautiful to look at. There was a wrongness about her features that made them pathetically ugly, and the sadness in her gray eyes seemed to mirror the sadness of all misfit things.

Byrna's voice had magic in it, and so did her brain. Wisdom came as simply to her as knowledge came to Bruce Hallam, but she had infinitely more warmth than he. Bruce, Kern sometimes thought, would dismember a human as dispassionately as he would cut wire in two if he needed the material for an experiment. Bruce looked the most normal of them all, but he would not have passed the questioning of the most superficial mental examination.

Now his voice was impatient. "What are we waiting for? Everything's ready."

"Yes, you must go quickly," the old man said. "Look—the light's coming toward red now, isn't it?"

The panel above the steel door was orange. As they watched it shifted and grew ruddier. Bruce went silently forward and laid his hand on the lever that opened the panel. When the light was pure red he pushed the steel bar down.

In half-darkness beyond the opening a gust of luminous atoms blew across a craggy horizon. Against it there was a suggestion of towers and arches and columns, and lights that might have been aircraft swung in steady orbits above.

No one spoke. After a moment Bruce closed the door again, grimacing. The light above it hovered toward a reddish purple and then turned blue.

"Not that world," Bruce said. "We'll try again."

In the shadow Byrna murmured:

"It doesn't matter—any world will be the same for us." Her voice was pure music.

"Listen! Do you hear planes?" the old man said. "It's time, children. You must go."

There was silence. Every eye watched the lighted panel. Colors hovered there to and fro through the spectrum. A faint ruddiness began to glow again.

"This time we'll take it if it looks all right," Bruce said, and laid his hand again upon the lever.

The light turned red. Soundlessly the round door swung open.

Sunlight came through, low green hills, and the clustered roofs of a town were visible a little distance away in a valley.

Without a word or a backward glance Bruce stepped through the door. One by one the others moved after him, Kern last. Kern's lips were pressed together and he did not glance behind him. He could have seen the hills of earth beyond the windows, and the blue October sky. He would not look at them. He shrugged his wings together and stooped to enter the gateway of the new world.

Behind them the old man watched in si-

lence, seeing the work of his lifetime ending before his eyes. The gulf between them was too broad for leaping. He was human and they were not. Across a vast distance, vaster than the gulf between worlds, he saw the family of the mutations step over their threshold and vanish forever.

He closed the door after them. The red light faded above it. He turned toward his own door where the knocking of World Council's police had already begun to summon him to his accounting.

CHAPTER II

His Own Kind

ABOVE them, the sky was blue. The five aliens who were alien to all worlds alike stood together on a hilltop looking down.

"It's beautiful," Kua said. "I'm glad we chose this one. But I wonder what the next one would have been like if we could have waited."

"It will be the same no matter where we go," Byrna's infinitely sweet voice murmured.

"Look at the horizon," Bruce said. "What is it?"

They saw then the first thing that marked this world alien to earth. For the most part it might have been any hilly wooded land they knew from the old place; even the roofs of the village looked spuriously familiar. But the horizon was curiously misted, and before them, far off, rose—something—to an impossible height halfway up the zenith.

"A mountain?" Kern asked doubtfully. "It's too high, isn't it?"

"A glass mountain," Kua said. "Yes, it *is* glass—or plastic? I can't be sure."

She had uncovered her single eye and the shining pupil was contracted as she gazed over impossible distances at the equally impossible bulk of that thing on the horizon. It rose in a vast sweep of opalescent color, like a translucent thundercloud hanging over the whole land. Knowing it for a mountain, the mind felt vertiginous at the thought of such tremendous bulk towering overhead.

"It looks clear," Kua said. "All the way through. I can't tell what's beyond it. Just an enormous mountain made out of—of plastic? I wonder."

Kern was aware of a tugging at his wing-surfaces, and glanced around in quick recognition of the strengthening breeze. He was the first to notice it.

"It's beginning to blow. And listen—do you hear?"

It grew louder as they stood there, a shrill, strengthening whine in the air coming from the direction of the cloudlike mountain. A whine that grew so rapidly they had scarcely recognized it as noise before it was deafening all about them, and the wind was like a sudden hurricane.

That passed in a gust, noise and wind alike, leaving them breathless and staring at one another in dismay.

"Look, over there, quick!" Kua said. "Another one's coming!"

Far off, but moving toward them with appalling speed, came a monstrous spinning tower of—light? Smoke? They could not be sure.

It whirled like a waterspout in a typhoon, vast, bendng majestically and righting itself again, and the air spun with it, and the wild, shrill screaming began again.

The vortex of brilliance passed them far to the left, catching them in its shrieking hurricane of riven air and then releasing them again into shaken silence. But there was another one on its way before they had caught their breath again, a whirling, bowing tower that spun screeching off toward the right. And after it another, and close behind that, a fourth.

The noise and the violence of the wind stunned Kern so that he had no idea what was happening to the others on the hilltop. He was susceptible because of his wings. The hurricane caught him up and whirled him sideward down the slope—shrieking in his ears with a noise so great it was almost silence, beyond the range of sound.

Stunned, he struggled for balance, leaning against the rushing wall of air as solid as a wall of stone. For a moment or two he kept the ground underfoot. Then his wings betrayed him and, in spite of himself, he felt the six-foot pinions blown wide and the muscles ached across his chest with the violence of the wind striking their spread surfaces.

The horizon tilted familiarly as he swooped in a banking curve. The glass mountain for a moment hung overhead and he looked straight down at the wooded hills, seeing tiny blowing figures reeling across the slopes in the grip of the hurricane winds. Hanging

here far above the treetops, he could see that the monsters of whirling light were coming thicker and faster across the hilltops, striding like giants, trailing vortices of wind and sound in their wake. For an instant he swung in the grip of the hurricane, watching the vast whirling spindles moving and bowing majestically across the face of the new earth.

Then the vortex caught him again and he was spun blindly into the heart of the whirlwind, deafened with its terrible screaming uproar, wrenched this way and that upon aching wings, too dizzy for fear or thought. Time ceased. Half senseless, he was whirled to and fro upon the irresistible winds. He closed his eyes against flying dust, locked his hands over his ears to shut out the deafening shrill of the blast, and let the hurricane do with him as it would.

Kern felt a hand on his arm and roused himself out of a half-stupor.

He thought, I must be on the ground again, and made an instinctive effort to sit up. The motion threw him into a ludicrous spin and he opened his eyes wide to see the earth whirling far below him.

He was coasting at terrific speed through the upper air upon a cold, screaming highway of wind, and moving easily beside him, riding on broad pinions like his own, a girl paralleled his flight.

LONG pale hair streamed behind her away from her blue-eyed face, whipped to pinkness by the blast. She was calling something to him, but the words were snatched from her lips by the wind and he heard nothing except that shrill, continuous howling all around them. He could see that she held him by one arm, and with her free hand was pointing downward vehemently. He could not hear her words, and knew he probably could not understand them if he did, but the gesture's meaning he could not mistake.

Nodding, he shrugged his left wing high and arched his body for a long downward spiral toward the ground. The girl turned with him, and together they glided sidewise across the rushing air-currents, delicately tacking against the wind, picking their way by instinctive muscular reactions of the spread pinions, while below them the ground swayed and turned like a fluid sea.

Kern glided downward on a wave of exultation like nothing he had ever experienced before in his life. He knew little about this world or about the girl beside him, but one thing stood out clearly—he was no longer alone. No longer the only winged being on an alien planet. And this long downward glide, like the motion of perfect dancers responding each to the other's most delicate motion, was the most satisfying thing he had ever known.

He heard a voice of impossible sweetness, and slowly, slowly, he felt warmth return to him (Chap. VII)

For the first time he realized one of the great secrets of a flying race—to fly alone is to know only half the joy of flying. When another winged being moves beside you on the airways, speed matching speed, wings beating as one, then at last you taste the full ecstasy of flight.

Kern was breathless with joy and excitement when the ground swooped up at them and he banked against the rush of his glide. With suddenly fluttering wings, he reversed his position in the air and felt with both feet for the solid earth. He had to run a little to cut down his speed, and the girl ran beside him, breathless and laughing a bit as she ran.

When they came to a halt and swung to face one another the long ashen hair blew forward in a cloud that had caught up with her at last, and she fought it, laughing, and brushed back the tangled mass with both hands, the pale wings the exact color of her hair folding back from her shoulders.

He saw now that she wore a tight tunic of some very fine, supple leather, and long tight boots of the same material. The hilt of a jeweled knife stood up against her ribs from a jeweled belt.

Around them the wind still blew cold and shrill, but the blast of it was slackening noticeably and warmth was creeping back little by little into the air. They stood on a wooded hill, under trees whose whipping branches added to the tumult of noise, and Kern could see a broad vista of the land before him, with no more of the vast bending giants of the hurricane moving across it. The storm must be over, he thought.

The girl spoke. She had a pleasant contralto voice, and the language she spoke was slightly guttural and of course entirely strange. Kern saw the surprise and doubt on her face when she saw that he did not understand her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You're a pretty thing. I wish we could talk to each other."

She matched his smile, but the bewilderment deepened on her face.

Kern thought, She can't believe I don't know her language. Could that mean there's only one tongue spoken in this world? It's wishful thinking—I want so much to believe it! Because that might mean the people here are all winged, and move around so easily that separate languages haven't had a chance to evolve.

His heart was beating faster, with an eagerness that he found a little ludicrous. He had never suspected even in his own dreams how much it would mean to him to belong at last to a race that could accept him as one of its own. Bruce Hallam had set his machine in the aggregate pattern of the whole mutant group, knowing as he did so how unlikely it was that more than one of them could hope for an equivalent world on a single planet. But Bruce's skill being what it was, Kern told himself there was no reason to be surprised that the expected had happened.

This world was his own. A winged world. He was luckiest and first of the group to find a place where he belonged. Exultation closed up his throat with the joy of being no longer alien.

"Or maybe I'm building too much on one example," he warned himself aloud. "Are we all winged in this world, girl? Say something, quick. I want to learn your language! Answer me, girl—are you an alien too, or is this the world where I belong?"

She laughed at him, recognizing the half-serious tone of his voice though the words meant nothing. And then her glance went across his shoulder, and a look of subtle withdrawal crossed her face. She said something in her guttural tongue and nodded toward the trees behind Kern.

He turned. A third winged figure was walking toward them under the still-roaring trees, wings whipped by the wind until the newcomer staggered now and then when the full blast caught him.

KERN was aware at first only of profound thankfulness. Another winged person was almost the answer to his remaining doubt. Where there were two, surely there must be many.

This was a man. Like the girl, he wore thin, tight leather and a dagger at his belt. His hair was red, and so were his silky wings, but his face was duskily tanned and Kern caught the flash of sidelong, light eyes as the man approached them. He saw, too, in another moment, that the newcomer was a hunchback. Between the shining reddish wings the man's back was slightly crooked, so that he looked up at them with his head awry. He had a young face, with beautiful clear planes, beneath the darkness of his tan.

"Gerd—" the girl called, and then hesitated. He flashed the light eyes at her, and Kern decided it was probably his name.

The pale gaze moved back to Kern, and watched him searchingly as the hunchback

fought the wind to the shelter of their tree. The man was wary, ready for distrust before he so much as saw Kern's face. It was odd, in a way.

They talked, the girl excitedly in her contralto voice, guttural words tumbling over each other. Gerd's answers were brief, in an unexpectedly deep tone. Presently he unsheathed his dagger and with it gestured toward Kern and the valley below them.

Kern bristled a little. There was no need for threats. If these people were still in a state of undevelopment where knives were their customary weapon, he was far beyond them in some ways at least. It was not a pleasant introduction to this world, where he felt himself already native, to have those first directions pointed out with a bare blade.

The girl, seeing his scowl, laughed gently and came forward to take his arm. She gestured Gerd away with her other hand, and he smiled grimly and stood back. The girl fluttered her wings a little and made a swooping gesture of her hand to indicate flight. She pointed to the valley. Then she stepped away to the brow of the hill, unfolded her wings, tested the dying wind with them, and leaned forward with sublime confidence into the void.

The updraft caught her beneath the pinions and bore her aloft on a beautiful sweep, her pale hair blowing like a banner. In midair she twisted to beckon, and Kern laughed in sheer delight and ran to follow her, spreading his dark wings so that at the fourth stride, with a leap, suddenly he was airborne. It was a glorious feeling to fly without shame or need of concealment. He scarcely heard the beat of wings behind him as the hunchback took to the air in their wake. The joy of flying in company was great enough just now to shut out all other thoughts from Kern's mind.

They swept high along the slow-running river of wind over a winding valley. Kern, watching for the companions with whom he had entered this wonderful world, saw no motion at all among the trees they soared over. He caught sight presently of a cluster of roofs far ahead, at the top of the valley, built around a stream that wound to and fro among the houses, and was filled with excited speculation as they neared the village.

My people, he thought. My own people. What kind of a town will it be, and what sort of culture? How fast can I learn the language? There's so much to find out.

The thought broke in his mind. For something—he had no name for it—was stirring very strangely through his body.

For an instant the whole airy world went blind around him. It was as if a new pair of lungs had opened up within him and he had drawn a deep, full breath of such air as no human ever tasted before. It was as if new eyes had opened in his head and he had looked on a new dimension with multiple sight. It was like neither of these, nor was it like anything a man ever experienced before. New, new, inexpressibly new!

And it was gone.

In flight Kern staggered a little, his wings forgetting to beat the sustaining air. The thing had come and gone so quickly, and yet it was not a wholly unfamiliar thing, after all. Once before something like it had happened. Something different, but at the time heartbreakingly new. It was when he first felt the wings thrust out upon his shoulders. When he first felt the change within himself that cut him off from mankind.

"Am I changing again?" he asked himself fiercely. "Isn't the mutation over yet? I won't change! I belong here now—I won't let anything spoil that!"

The feeling was gone. He could not remember even now what it had been actually like. He would not change! He would fight change while breath remained in him. Whatever strange new mutation struggled now for being in his mysterious flesh he would strangle before he let it come between him and these people with wings.

It had gone, now. He would forget it. It should be as if it had never happened.

CHAPTER III

Gathering Danger

SUNLIGHT winked from the diamond-paned windows of the village. They circled above the rooftops and came in against the wind for a landing on the high, flat roof of the central building, its open square paved with tiles painted in bright, crude pictures of flying men and women.

From above Kern could see the cobbled streets winding narrowly past overhanging eaves, little stone bridges arching the stream that gushed rapidly down through the village. Flowers were bright in narrow, ordered bands

around the houses. There were steep streets that rose in steps around the curves of the hill upon which the town was based.

The roofs were steeply pitched, arguing a heavy snowfall in winter, but each of them had a landing area on the highest part of the house, usually facing a low door let into a gable. And Kern's last doubt departed. This was indeed a village of flying people. He had come into his own world at last.

His content lasted about five minutes.

Then they came down upon the brightly tiled landing-roof of what was probably the townhall, and Kern, already fluttering his wings for a landing, saw something that made him instinctively tighten the chest-muscles that controlled his wings so that they stiffened into broad pinions again. He soared and made a second circle about the rooftop.

The girl had reversed herself and was reaching with one foot for a landing when she saw what had startled him. She laughed and looked up, beckoning through the cloud of her settling hair.

Kern made a third circle, fighting the updraft among the houses while he looked down dubiously at the two dead men sprawled upon the roof. Both were young and both were winged. The girl walked delicately by them as if they were not there, settling her wings precisely. She stepped over the pool of blood, still liquid, that ran from a wound in the nearer man's neck, streaked across the width of his quiet pinion, and that puddled the brilliant tiles with a color of even brighter hue.

There was a measured beating of the air above Kern, and he looked up to see the hunchback hovering on silky red wings above him. Sunlight flashed on a bared knife-blade. Gerd gestured down. And there was something about his poise in the air, the way he handled his muscular, twisted body, that warned Kern not to precipitate a struggle. It occurred to him for the first time that fighting in midair must be an art requiring skills he had never learned—yet.

Gingerly he circled again and came down very lightly at the edge of the roof, holding his wings half-open until he was sure of his footing. The girl was waiting for him. She smiled, her blue glance flicking the dead men. Then she slapped her own dagger significantly, glanced at the bodies and back at Kern, and with a careless beckoning motion turned to enter the roof door.

A little dazed, Kern followed. Did she mean she herself had killed them? What extraordinary sort of culture had he found ready-made for him here? The first doubts stirring in his mind, he stooped his wings under the door-frame and groped down a narrow, curving stairway behind the floating hair of his guide. Behind him he heard Gerd's feet thump uncompromisingly from step to step.

Voices came up the stair-well as they descended. At the bottom of the flight Kern followed the girl into a big stone-paved room, low-ceilinged, smoky from the fire that blazed in a huge cavern of whitewashed brick at one end of the roof.

The room was full of the living and the dead. Bewildered, Kern glanced about at the winged bodies which had obviously been dragged carelessly out of the center of the room and heaped against the walls. Blood lay in coagulating pools here and there on the flags. The men about the fireplace seemed to be debating something in loud voices. They looked up sharply as the girl entered. Then there was a clattering rush and a clamor of guttural voices as they hurried to greet her.

Kern made out one word among their sentences that seemed to be her name.

"Elje—Elje!"

Their voices echoed under the low ceiling, their wings made a rustle and soft clatter as they shouldered together around her. If it had not been for the unconsidered dead at their feet, Kern would have been happy without reservation, knowing at last beyond any doubt that this was a world of the winged.

They were talking about him, obviously. Elje, braiding her disordered hair, spoke rapidly and glanced from Kern to her companions and back again. Kern did not wholly like the looks of the men. Without wings, they would have seemed an undisciplined, violent group. Their faces were scarred and weather-beaten. All of them wore knives, and they had clearly been in a hard fight within the last few hours.

Among the dead on the floor there were men without wings. There were also, he saw now, a few women; some winged, some not. Two races? Somehow he surmised that was not true; there was a subtle likeness among them all, the wingless and the winged, that marked them of the same racial stock.

Presently he began to notice that the unwinged were all either elderly or adolescent. He remembered that his own wings had not begun to grow until he was past eighteen. Was it only in their prime that this race could fly? And would he, with advancing years,

lose again this glorious attribute he had only now begun to enjoy?

THE thought damped that surge of exultation which still flooded his mind beneath the surface bewilderment. And then he grinned wryly to himself, thinking:

"Maybe it won't happen. Maybe I won't live that long!"

For the looks of the grim men around him were not encouraging. If he had guessed right about a universal language in this world, it was not strange that his ignorance of it gave them room for suspicion. And in a village where life was held as cheaply as it was held here, he could probably expect direct and violent reactions to suspicion.

He was not far wrong. The men spoke among themselves in brawling voices a moment or two longer, the girl Elje braiding her hair carelessly and putting in a word now and then. While Kern stood there, debating with himself what was best to do, the argument came to a swift climax. Elje called something in a clear voice and, directly behind him, Kern heard a guttural monosyllable in answer, and the rustle of wings, and felt something cold and edged laid against the side of his neck.

He stood quite still. Then the hunchback, Gerd, sidled around into his view, holding the sharp knife with a steady hand against Kern's jugular. The pale eyes in the dark young face were steady and full of cold threat.

Someone moved across the flagstones behind him and Kern felt hands draw his wrists together, felt the roughness of rope pulled tight around them. He did not protest. He was too surprised, and too unaccustomed to violence in his daily life, to know just now what course he should take. And he was filled still with the thought that these were his own people.

A something heavy and clinging fell suddenly across his wings. He jumped and looked back. It was a net, which a man with a scarred face and suspicious, squinting eyes was rapidly knotting together at the base of his pinions.

The hunchback grunted another monosyllable and drove the point of his knife against Kern's shoulder, jerking his red head toward a flight of stairs across the room. The winged men drew back to let the two pass, silent now and watching with impassive faces. Elje, finishing the last of the second braid, tossed the pale silken rope of it across her shoulder and would not meet Kern's eyes as he went by.

The stairs twisted unevenly through narrow stone walls. At the third level the hunchback threw open a heavy, low door and followed Kern into the room beyond. It was rather a pleasant little place, circular, with tile-banded walls and a tiled floor. The single window was barred and looked out over rooftops and distant hills. There was a low bed, a table, two chairs, nothing more.

The hunchback pushed Kern roughly toward one of the chairs. Both of them, Kern noticed, had low backs to clear the wings of those who might sit in them. He sank down and looked at the red-winged man expectantly. What happened then was the last thing, perhaps, that he might have expected to hear.

Gerd held out his dagger, level across his palm, pointed to it with the other hand and growled, "*Kaj.*" He slapped his sheath then, said, "*Kajen,*" and dropped the dagger into it. His pale eyes bored into Kern's.

Unexpectedly, Kern heard himself laughing. Partly it was relief, for he would not

[*Turn page*]

have been surprised to feel the edge of that knife called *kaj* sink into his throat once the door had closed behind them.

Instead, apparently this was to be a lesson in language. . . .

Once, in the night, he awoke briefly. Strange stars were shining through the bars of his window. He thought there was someone stealthily looking at him from beyond the bars, and sleepily realized that it would take as great skill to fly in silence as to walk without noise. But he saw no one. He slept again and dreamed it was Elje at the window, touching the bars with light fingertips as she smiled in at him in the starlight, her face dabbled with blood.

For two weeks he saw no one but Gerd. The pale eyes in the dark face became very familiar to him, and gradually the deep voice became familiar and understandable too. Gerd was a patient and indefatigable teacher, and the language was a simple one, made for a simple culture. Indeed, Kern learned it so rapidly that he began to catch Gerd's suspicious sidelong glances, and once, from his door, overheard a conversation on the stair outside when Gerd and Elje met.

"I think he may be a spy," the hunchback's deep guttural said.

Elje laughed. "A spy who doesn't speak our language?"

"He learns it too readily. I wonder, Elje—The Mountain is cunning."

"Hush," was all she answered. But Kern thereafter was careful to pretend he knew less of the language than he really did.

The Mountain. He thought of that in the long hours when he was alone. A mountain, strange of shape, the color of clouds, towering halfway up the heavens. It was more than inert matter, if these winged people spoke of it with that hush in their voices.

For a fortnight he waited and listened and learned. Once more, in the night, with the nameless stars looking in at the window, he felt that inexplicable stirring of alien life deep within him, and was frightened. It passed quickly, and was gone too fast for him to put any name to it, or to remember it clearly afterward. Mutation? Continuing change, in some unguessable form? He would not think of it.

ON THE fourteenth night, the Dream came.

He had not thought very much about Bruce Hallam. Kua and the others. Subconsciously, he did not want to. This was his world and the other mutants were actually intruders, false notes in the harmony. Danger he might find here, even death, but it was a winged world, and his own.

There were dreams at night. Voices whispering, whose tones he half-recognized and would not allow himself to remember when he awoke. Something was searching for his soul.

Before that final contact on the fourteenth night, he had eavesdropped enough on other conversations held on the stairs between Gerd and Elje to understand a little of what went on around him.

Gerd was urging that they leave the town and return somewhere, and Elje was adamant.

"There's no danger yet."

"There is danger whenever we're away from the eyrie. Not even the Mountain can guide enemies through the poison winds. Our safety has always been a quick raid, Elje, and then back to the eyrie. But to stay here, gorging ourselves—in a *town*—is madness."

"I like the comfort here." Elje said naively. "It's been a long time since I've eaten and drunk so well, and slept on such a bed."

"You'll sleep on a harder bed soon, then," Gerd said dourly. "The towns will gather. They must know already that we're here."

"Are we afraid of the townsmen?"

"When the Mountain walks—" the hunchback said, and left the sentence unfinished.

Elje's laughter rang false.

That night, Kern felt seeking fingers try again the doors of his mind, and this time his subconscious resistance could not keep them out. He recognized the mind behind that seeking—the infinitely sad, infinitely wise mind of the mutant Byrna, with the lovely voice and the pale, unlovely face.

For a moment he floundered, lost in the depths of that intelligence so much more fathomless than his own. For a moment timeless sorrow washed him like the waters of the sea. Then he found himself again, and was looking, somehow, through new and different eyes, into a grassy hollow filled with starlight. Into Kua's beautiful honey-colored face and her great single eye. Into Sam Brewster's veiled gaze.

Dimly he groped for Bruce Hallam, who had opened the door for them all. Bruce was missing. And as for Byrna—it was Byrna's eyes through which he saw them. Her mind, gripping his like the clasp of hands, cupping

his like a bowl of still water. Soundlessly through space came a voice. Kua's voice.

"Byrna, have you found him?"

"I think—yes. Kern! Kern!"

Without words, he answered them.

"Yes, Kua. Yes, Byrna. I'm here."

There was resentment in Kua's voice—the voice of her mind, for no words were spoken in this curious seance. Kern found time to wonder briefly if Byrna had always possessed this strange ability to bridge distances, or if it had burgeoned in her here as something struggled in himself for new being.

"We've been trying a long time, Kern," Kua said coldly. "You were hard to reach."

"I—I wasn't sure you'd be here any longer."

"You thought we'd have gone on to other worlds. Well, we would have, if we could. But Bruce was hurt. In the storm."

"Badly?"

She hesitated. "We—can't be sure. Look."

Through Byrna's eyes Kern saw Bruce Hallam's motionless figure, lying silent on a bed of boughs. He looked oddly pale, almost ivory in color. His breathing was nearly imperceptible. And Byrna's mind, groping through the void for his, found only a strange, dim spinning—something too far away and too abstract for the normal mind to grasp. She touched it briefly—and it spun out of contact and was gone.

"A trance?" Kua said. "We don't know, yet. But we've used Byrna's vision and learned a little about this world. How much do you know, Kern?"

Kern told them then, with Byrna's tongue, too absorbed in the needs of the moment to realize fully what a strange meeting this was of more than human minds, over unguessed distances of alien land. He told them what he knew, what he had guessed from overheard conversations—not much, but a general picture.

"The planet's mostly ocean. A small continent, about the size of Australia, I think. City-states all over it. Elje's band are outlaws. They have a hideout somewhere, and they raid the towns. They seem—well, scornful of the townspeople, and a little afraid, too. I can't quite understand that."

"This—Gerd? He spoke of a Mountain?" Kua said.

"Yes. Something about—when the Mountain walks."

"You know the Mountain," Kua said. "The storm came from there. Those vortices of light and energy rose out of it."

KERN remembered the spindles of blinding brilliance that strode across the land in the maelstrom of the winds. "We don't understand much of it yet," Kua was saying in a troubled tone. We know there's danger connected with that Mountain. I think there is life there, something we don't know about. Something that probably couldn't have developed on Earth. The conditions could have been too alien. But here anything is possible."

Kern felt the thought forming in his brain—in Byrna's brain.

"Life? Intelligent life? What do you know about it?"

"Maybe not life as we understand the word. Call it a—force. No, it's more tangible than that. I don't know—" The thought-voice of Kua faltered. "Dangerous. We may learn more of it, if we live. This much we've seen, though, through Byrna's vision, and mine. We've sensed forces reaching out from the Mountain, into the minds of men. The minds of the winged townspeople. Assembling them for war." She hesitated. "Kern, do you know they're on their way now, to your town, where the outlaws are?"

He was instantly alert.

"Now? From where? How soon can they get here?"

"I'm not sure. They aren't in my sight yet—over the horizon, that is. Byrna, tell him."

The mind that held Kern's stirred, and through it he saw as through a haze rank upon rank of winged beings flying with steady beasts of their pinions over a dark night-time terrain. Byrna's thought murmured,

"You see, I can't tell how far. It's new, this clairvoyance since we came from Earth. I could always see but not so clearly, and I never could show others what was in my mind. So I only know these men are flying against your village."

"And the force of men—the Mountain, I think, has armed them somehow," Kua put in. "Byrna has seen the weapons they carry. You'd better warn your friends—your jailers or whatever they are. Otherwise you may be caught in the middle of a fight."

"I will." Kern's mind was full now of something new. "You say you've developed this clairvoyance since the time when you came here, Byrna. Has it happened to the others, too?"

"To me, maybe, a little," Kua said slowly. "A sharpening of focus, not much more than

that. To Sam—" Her thought form glanced sidewise to Sam Brewster, sitting silent, with the hood of his secondary lids drawn over his terrible eyes, "—I think nothing's happened. He can't join our talk now, you see. Byrna's mind can't reach into his at all. We'll have to tell him all that's been said, later. And Bruce." She shrugged. "Perhaps the winged people will tell you how we can help him. The edge of one of the vortices caught him, and he's been like this ever since. We'd hoped to go on, you know, Kern, to find our own worlds as you—perhaps—have found yours. But without Bruce, we're helpless."

Kern was aware of a tightening and strengthening of his own mind as a problem at last came before him that must be met. Until now he had been almost in a trance of wonder and delight and dismay at the new things of this new, winged world. But the time for lassitude was over. He gathered his thoughts for speech, but Kua's voice cut his beginning phrases short.

"Kern, there's danger in the Mountain. The —thing—whatever it is, knows we're here. It lives in the Mountain, or perhaps it *is* the Mountain. But Byrna has sensed hatred from it. Malevolence."

There was a sudden harshness to her thought.

"Kern, you're a soft fool!" Kua said. "Did you think you could reach Paradise without earning it? Whether you help us or not, you've got to face danger before you'll find your place in this world, or any other. I don't think you can manage without us. And we need your help, too. Together, we may still lose the battle. Separately, there's no hope for any of us. We *know!* The Mountain may be a mutation as far beyond us as we are beyond the animals. But we've got to fight."

Her voice blurred suddenly, faded to a thin drone. The starlit hill and the faces before him swirled and melted in Kern's sleeping sight. He struggled for a moment against intangible danger—something formless and full of strong malevolence. He saw—what was it? A vast, coiling Something like a ribbon of fire, moving lazily in darkness and aware of him—terribly aware.

Far off in the void he felt the quiver of fright in a mind he knew—Byrna's mind. But he lost the contact instantly, and then someone was shaking him by the shoulder and saying something in insistent, guttural tones.

He opened his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

Evil Mountain

IN HIS vision, the coiling flame had left so brilliant an image upon his eyelids that for an instant he could see nothing but the blue-green scar of after-sight swimming upon his vision. Then that faded and he was staring up into Gerd's darkly handsome young face.

Kern struggled to sit up, beating his wings a little to help him rise. The gust stirred Kern's red hair and sent motes dancing in the beam of sunlight falling across the bed. Kern in the aftermath of amazement and terror forgot to dissemble his knowledge of the winged men's tongue. The simple syllables raced off his lips.

"Gerd, Gerd, you've got to listen to me! I've been finding out things I didn't suspect until now. Let me up. The townspeople are coming!"

Gerd put a hard palm against his chest.

"Not so fast. You seem to have learned our language in your sleep. No, stay there." His voice rose. "Elje!"

She was a moment or two in coming, and Gerd stood back with his hand on his dagger and his pale, suspicious eyes unswerving as he watched Kern. When Elje came, bright-faced in the morning sun, her ashen braids wound in a coronet that glistened against the high arch of her wings, he spoke without taking his eyes from Kern.

"Our guest awoke this morning with a strangely fluent knowledge of speech. I told you before of the danger from spies, Elje."

"All right, I do know more of your language than I pretended," Kern admitted. "I just learned it faster than you believed, that's all. That doesn't matter now. Do you know the townspeople are coming to attack?"

Gerd bent forward swiftly, half-open wings hovering above him in the sunlight.

"How do you know that? You *are* a spy!"

"Let him talk, Gerd," Elje said. "Let him talk."

Kern talked. . . .

In the end, he could see that they did not yet fully trust him. It was not surprising, for the tale would have bewildered anyone. But the prospect of an advancing army was enough to divide their thoughts.

"If I were a spy, would I warn you they

were coming?" Kern demanded, seeing their dubious glances fixed on him at the end of his story.

"It isn't the army you'd be spying for," Gerd said reluctantly.

"Your other world—Earth," Elje murmured, her eyes searching Kern's. "If that were true, it could explain some things. But we know of no other worlds."

Briefly Kern thought that it might be easier for one of Elje's culture to believe in the existence of other worlds than for a denizen of some more sophisticated civilization. The people of this winged race had not yet closed their minds to all they could not see. It was not a race so sure of its own omnipotence that it denied all unfamiliar things existence.

"How could I hurt you now?" Kern said. "Why should I warn you, if I were on their side?"

"It's the Mountain," Elje said surprisingly. "Why do you suppose we kept you here in this bare room, without furnishings, without anything you could build into a weapon? Or do you know?"

Bewildered, he shook his head.

"We were not sure if you were a slave to the Mountain. If you were, a coil of wire, a bit of iron—anything—would have been dangerous to us in your hands." Her eyes were questioning.

Again Kern shook his head. Gerd began to speak, his voice faintly derisive.

"A long story and an evil one. Perhaps you know it. At any rate, we're the only free people in this world. Oh, there may be a few others, but not many, and they don't live long. The Mountain is jealous of its slaves. Aside from our group, all the rest of mankind belongs to the Mountain. All!"

"This Mountain?" Kern said. "What is it?"

Gerd shrugged his red wings.

"Who knows? Demon—god. If we ever had a history, no one knows it now. No legend goes back beyond the coming of the Mountain. We only know that it has always been there, and from it, whispers float out to men in their sleep, and they become slaves to the whisper. Something happens in their minds. For the most part they live as they choose, in their cities. But sometimes that voice comes again, and then they're mindless, doing as the Mountain bids them."

"We don't know what the Mountain is," Elje said. "But we know that it's intelligent. It can guide men's hands to make weapons, when there's a need for weapons. And it can send out storms, such as the one in which we found you. Not for a long, long while has there been a storm out of the Mountain. If you're not a spy, how do you explain the fact that your coming and the storm happened in the same hour?"

HE SHRUGGED. About that, he also was puzzled.

"I wish I knew. But I'll find out, if any human can. Do you mean the army that's coming against you is sent by the Mountain? Why?"

"As long as we remain free, the Mountain will try to enslave us," Elje said. "And we'll fight the townsmen for the things we need, since we don't dare fight the Mountain. We've stayed too long in this village—yes, Gerd, I know! We'll return to the eyrie now. If an army of the townsfolk is coming, they'll have weapons the Mountain made them build, and the weapons will be dangerous, whatever they may be this time."

"The prisoner may know all this already," Gerd said dourly. "That doesn't matter. But it will matter if we take him to the eyrie. He could lead our enemies there, Elje."

"Through the poison winds?" But Elje drew in her lower lip thoughtfully. "He tells a mad story, Gerd. I know that. Could it be true?"

"Well, what then?"

"These companions he spoke of. They sound like gods. And they talked of fighting against the Mountain."

"Fight against the stars," Gerd said and laughed. "But not the Mountain. Not even gods could win such a war."

"They aren't gods," Kern said. "But they have powers none of us know. I think our coming marks a turning place in the history of your race, Elje—Gerd. You can kill us or abandon us and go on as you always have, or you can believe me and help us, and fight this time with a chance of winning. Will you do it?"

Elje was silent for a moment. Then she laughed and stood up suddenly with a flutter of her wings.

"I'll go along with you and talk to your friends," she said. "If they're as you say—yes, Kern, I'll believe you. For the Mountain never has changed human flesh. It can touch our minds, but not our bodies. I think in the beginning were men whose brains had some weakness that let the whisper come in, and those men were armed by the Mountain and

killed their fellows, until only we outlaws remained.

"Our minds over the generations have been bred to resist invasion as the townspeople were bred to welcome it. I think—I know—if the Mountain could reach into our bodies and make that tiny change that would open our mind to it, then it would win. But it can't. It can't alter our bodies except by killing us. If I see with my own eyes these companions of Kern's, I'll know there is a power greater than the Mountain. And we'll fight together, Kern!"

A little later, floating high above the nest of hills which cradled the village, Kern rocked on spread wings and pressed his eyes tightly shut, thinking with all the strength of his mind:

"Byrna, Byrna! Answer me, Byrna! Help me find you. Byrna, do you hear?"

Silence, except for the small noises drifting up from far below, distant shouts as Elje's winged band collected in haste the loot they would take with them to their eyrie. Kern's vision swam with the flecked clouds of sunlight on closed lids. Deliberately he blanked his mind to receive an answer. None came.

"Byrna! There may not be time to waste. Byrna, Kua, answer me!"

In his eagerness and impatience he remembered again what he had glimpsed dimly through Byrna's memory, the ranks of armed fliers moving through the night on steadily beating wings toward the village. Perhaps from so far away they would not arrive for many hours—perhaps so near that the cloud on the horizon now was not mist, but armed men. . . .

"Byrna! Do you hear me?"

"Kern!" The answer he sought came with sharp impact, like a blow in the face. As if she were almost at his side and speaking with dreadful violence. He caught terror in the contact of minds, cold, controlled terror that chilled him so the sunny air turned suddenly icy around him. He knew instantly that she had heard him before, had been hedging for just the right contact so that there need be no wasted moments of groping and finding focus upon one another. He caught the hard impact and the terror and the urgency in the moment their minds met. Then her thoughts tumbled into his mind:

"Kern! Hurry! No time to waste. Do you see the grove of blooming trees left on the horizon? Come! Make new contact there."

She blanked as suddenly as she had entered his mind. And because thoughts are so infinitely more rapid than words she had conveyed those four ideas—identification, haste, locality and a promise of future contact—in almost no lapse of time at all. But in that brief instant while their minds did meet, something happened.

Kern rocked on shaken wings as if a blow had jolted him. He snatched his mind back from the brief touch with Byrna's quickly, quickly, scorched with the incandescent hatred that had blazed in the void between them. For the coiled ribbon of fire which had swum so strangely through nothingness when he woke from his clairvoyant dream was awake and alive now, and terribly avid.

IT HAD been waiting, he knew in the instant while his mind leaped back in recoil from that burning contact. It had found them as he waked slowly from the long, leisured conversation in the seance.

Since that moment it had lain, coiled, in waiting. *It?*

Folding his wings, he dropped forward in a long, breathtaking dive, the air screaming past his ears. From a tiled rooftop far below, he saw two figures rise, one on pale wings, one on glossy red. He spread his own pinions then, exulting in the strain on his chest-muscles when the broad surfaces checked his dive, bore him up in a steep arc that made the air feel warm and solid as he carved a long curve through it.

"That way," he told Elje, pointing, when she rose within hearing. "We'll have to hurry. There's something wrong. I think perhaps the Mountain, or Something in the Mountain, knows we're here."

Elje's clear bright color blanched in the sunlight. Behind her, Gerd's eyes flashed sideward in the dark face, suspicious, mistrusting still.

"Why do you say that?"

Kern told them as they flew, the grove of blossoming trees on the horizon seeming to slip rapidly down the edge of the skyline and draw nearer far below. It was not easy to talk and fly. Kern's breath began to come fast, and his chest and wings ached with the speed, after so many days of inactivity. When he finished speaking there was silence.

"The eyrie lies that way." Elje said presently, in a controlled voice. She pointed right with a smooth bare arm. "I've sent most of the men on with our loot. Gerd chose twenty to follow us. You don't know where or how

far the Mountain's men are?"

Kern shook his head. "Maybe I can find out at the next meeting with Byrna."

He glanced behind them and saw the little band of Elje's bodyguard flying a few minutes in their rear, big men all of them, with stolid, hard-eyed faces. Several carried light wicker squares looped up with straps.

"Seats for your friends, Kern," Elje explained. "We need them when we carry our young people or our old ones, who no longer have the power to fly." Her face darkened, as Kern knew their faces always did when the winged people thought of the days in which they would no longer travel the lanes of air.

It occurred to him then that their battles might be ferocious things, fought by men as fanatic in their own way as those who fought on Earth for entry into an imagined paradise. For these men fought their own old age as surely as they fought an enemy. No one who has once spread wings upon the air-currents willingly faces a life without wings.

The blooming grove was beneath them now.

"If you make contact this time with—it—again, Kern, I think *it* will know more easily where to direct its men," Elje said. "There is great danger. Will you let this meeting with your friends go for awhile? You may be doing them harm as well as us. The army of the Mountain may be very near now."

Kern hesitated. He had been dreading with every wingbeat the moment when he must open his mind again to that coiled and scorching malevolence. For an instant he toyed with the idea of postponing searching for Byrna's mind, but he knew it would only mean putting off the inevitable. Grimly he shook his head.

"Byrna!" he called out mentally. "Byrna, what next?"

As before, for long moments there was no answer. Then briefly, like a gasp, he caught the touch of Byrna's mind—only briefly and very incoherently, because between them in the instant of contact flashed the blinding hatred of the—the interloper. Only when their minds touched, apparently, could the white-hot malevolence reach them, but it lay ambushed and ready, and this time it seemed to flare out between them almost before Byrna's voice could speak.

Reeling back, shaken and stunned by the thing between them, Kern caught only a ragged thought or two from Byrna's mind.

"Three hills—hurry—army!"

That was all that got through. For an instant the void flamed with the blankness of sheer hatred. Then Kern opened his eyes and caught himself on reeling wings. Elje and Gerd watched him without speaking as he controlled his shaken faculties with a great effort. Elje was white with terror, but on Gerd's face suspicion was still predominant.

Three hills in a shadowy row cut the horizon line. Kern gestured toward them and in silence the little group flew on. If Byrna's gasp of "—army—" meant the enemy were nearly upon them, there was nothing to do except fly as they had been flying, in the hope of reaching the mutants before disaster overtook them all.

CHAPTER V

Pursuit

THE three hills were not quite below them, and Kern was watching the skyline anxiously for signs of the winged army which was moving against them, when something from below flashed across his eyes. He blinked and looked down. From a clump of trees the light-beam flashed again, dazzlingly, from a tiny point of brilliance. Then a small figure stepped out from the shelter of the branches, waving at him.

It was Kua. Even from this height he could see the reflected light in twin points on the sun-glasses she held in one hand. She had signalled him by the heliograph with the only thing they had for reflecting light.

Pointing downward, he let one wing tilt high and came about in a long glide, lying at full length upon the air with his heels higher than his head. The ground swung like water in a cup and Kua seemed to rush upward to meet him as the swift dive cut the space between them.

The others were with her by the time Kern had put his feet to the grass. He was conscious, as always, of a little shock of memory renewed when he met again Kua's great single gaze from the center of her forehead. Byrna, hurrying to meet him, lifted a pale, drawn little face.

"Kern!" she cried in a voice that was pure music. And he thought there was in her eyes, and in Kua's, a subtle something that was new to him. Mutation had gone on, perhaps, with them as with him, a step beyond Earthly

mutation. Their powers were strengthened, so that, in part, they both were strangers to him.

Sam Brewster came out smiling and extending his hand, and Kern took it with the little inward quailing he had always felt before Sam, the instinctive averting of his gaze from Sam's veiled eyes. Beyond Sam's shoulder he saw Bruce Hallam lying motionless, as if he had not stirred since they laid him on the pallet of boughs. His face was ivory-hard and as withdrawn from living as the face of a statue that had never known life.

Everything was confused for a few moments. Byrna was crying, "Hurry, hurry!" and Kua's distance-piercing glance kept sweeping the horizon as the winged people swooped to the ground behind Kern and came forward swiftly, wings half open to speed their hurrying feet.

Kern heard Elje's little gasp of incredulity and dismay when Kua's blue central eye turned upon the newcomers, but the winged girl was too good a commander to waste time after that first glance which confirmed what Kern had told her.

In a matter of seconds they were in the air.

Bruce Hallam, still motionless in his mysterious slumber, had been swung on a wicker carrier between two burly fliers. The other three mutants, in their seats between winged bearers, scarcely had time for amazement or uncertainty as they were wafted aloft.

Kern, flying with the rest over the rolling hilltops with the vast glass cloud of the Mountain shadowing the horizon, timed his flight to the pace of the slowest so that he might talk in midair with the wingless people in the carriers. And close beside him Elje and Gerd hovered, watching almost jealously every expression on the faces of the speakers.

"What do they say, Kern?" Elje asked breathlessly, timing her words to the rhythm of her wings. "Are—are you sure these people are human? I never saw such—such—creatures. Gerd, after all could they be gods?"

Gerd laughed shortly, but there was uneasiness in his voice.

"Let them talk. Is the enemy near yet? Ask them, Kern."

"Near, I think," Byrna said. She was clutching the straps of her swaying chair with both tiny hands and her incredibly musical voice might have been crooning a song instead of shaping the syllables of terror which echoed the look in her eyes. "Kern, I don't dare—look—for them any more! You saw what happened! Kern, tell me what it was *you* saw.

"I? Fire, I think. A coiling ribbon of it—and hate. I could almost see the hate!"

"The Mountain," Byrna said, her eyes turning automatically toward the great cloud hanging ominously in the sky. "What do you know about it, Kern? Have these people told you?"

Briefly he gave her the story Elje had recounted.

"It has never yet been able to change people physically, or there wouldn't be any outlaws left," he finished. "At least, so Elje thinks. Byrna, I wonder if it could change us? We're malleable—abnormally malleable. I—"

He hesitated. Not even to Byrna did he yet want to speak of the deep, mysterious stirrings he had felt in his own flesh.

"You think you and Kua may have felt something like a changing in yourselves?"

Byrna nodded, her eyes wide and distressed. "We can't tell how much, yet. Maybe the Mountain is the cause of it."

Unexpectedly Sam Brewster, swinging between his carriers above Byrna, leaned forward.

"The Mountain's where the answer is, Kern. I don't think we'll be safe until we've explored it."

"Safe!" Kern said grimly. "If you'd seen what I have, you'd never talk that way."

"It won't matter," Kua called from a little way ahead, twisting in her seat to send a piercing blue gaze back at them. "Look! They're coming!"

KERN'S sharp exclamation as he banked swiftly and turned to follow her pointing finger was explanation enough to Elje and Gerd what was happening. A shiver of excitement ran through the whole flying group, a tightening of muscle and mind. For an instant their pace slackened, simultaneously, without signal, almost as a flight of birds wheels simultaneously at no perceptible message.

There was nothing visible on the horizon where Kua pointed.

"I can see the first of them—a long line," she said. "They're carrying something, but I'm not sure what it is. Round things—nets of something shining, like thin wire. Light's

flashing from it when the sun hits them."

Rapidly Kern told Elje.

"New weapons," she said. "I expected that. I wonder—well, we'll know soon enough." She beat her wings together and soared suddenly above the group, looking down with speculative eyes.

"We're going too slowly. Kern." She flashed a glance at him. "This other friend of yours, the injured one. He's heavy. He slows us. And he takes two men out of the fight if we're caught. I think—" She made an expressive downward gesture.

"No!" Kern said quickly. "He's the most powerful of us all, if we can rouse him."

"Well, he must be first to fall, if the need comes." Elje said. "But we'll wait." She called commands to the group flying before them, and eight men wheeled in the air and swung back. Kern watched them slip smoothly, without a break in their wing-beats, into the harness of the wicker carriers, relieving those who had borne the burden this far.

"Now, quickly!" Elje said. "The eyrie!"

They were almost over the jagged hills where the outlaws' refuge lay, when the first ranks of the enemy swept over the skyline and saw them. The fugitives had flown low, taking advantage of every line of hills and trees for cover, and despite their burden they flew fast, their pace nearly matching that of the pursuers because of the all-night flight the enemy had made.

But they had not yet reached shelter when the sound of a horn, clear and high, fell through the sunny air, and after it, drowning out the thin, sweet notes, the roar of angry men sighting their prey.

Elje was very calm.

"Gerd," she said. "You'll lead the way in?"

"No!" he growled. "Let one of the captains go. I feel like a fight."

"Stay, then," Elje answered.

She called a command to a man in the front rank of her little party. They were flying as fast as wing could carry them toward a gap between two jagged, dark hills through which Kern could see a wilderness of tortured rock beyond. It looked volcanic in origin, and waves of intermittent heat and strange metallic odors drifted to them on the wind as they approached.

"There are poisonous currents in these hills," Elje told Kern as they swept forward. "Many of us died before we learned the way through them. Now we have a shelter where no one can follow us who hasn't a guide."

Abruptly she ceased to speak. Kern turned a startled glance and saw her reel in midair, throwing back her head so that the clear line of her throat was white and taut against the blue sky. Then, without a word, suddenly she crumpled in full flight. An instant longer her wings sustained her and she hung limp from the spread pinions. Then they too folded back and she dropped like a stone.

Time stopped for Kern. Everything stood still, the hills with their floating vapors, the flying troupe, the breeze halted among the trees below. He could see the first ranks of the oncoming enemy halted too and hanging motionless in space, their shouts nothing but a buzz in his ears.

He saw too, very clearly, the great ovals of the weapons they carried, and the light that whirled in intricate, thin patterns like wires of brilliance within the ovals. He saw the cone of light reach out from the nearest oval and touch another of the fugitive fliers.

It had happened in an instant, and it was over. Kern dived for Elje's falling body almost before she had ceased to speak, swung under her, caught her across his arms in a welter of slack wings and loosened hair.

Gerd's harsh voice was shouting orders above him. By the time Kern had labored up to their level with his burden he saw the newly-appointed guide of the winged men vanishing into the cleft between the hills, leading two by two the harnessed pairs who carried the mutants.

The roar of savage voices behind them filled the shaken air, and the roar of countless wings beating in ranks as the enemy swooped upon them. They were very near now—so near Kern could see the distorted, shouting faces and the flash of knives in the hands of the foremost.

It was a strange and eerie thing to realize that no human hatred burned behind the angry faces, but the fiery, venomed malignancy which was the Mountain. Or did this oncoming rabble know why it fought? Did they think this fury their own emotion, not a monstrously inspired rage that turned them to automatons?

A cone of light swung past Kern, numbing his wing-tip, and touched a fast-flying man in front of him between the wings. The man jolted convulsively, arched backward and then crumpled to hang for an instant motionless on the momentum of his own flight. The wings folded as Elje's had done, and the man dropped downward out of sight.

GERD was gesturing Kern frantically on. The hunchback hovered on red pinions recklessly in full view of the enemy, knives flashing in each hand, ready to engage whoever came within reach of his blades. He was shouting hoarse orders scarcely audible above the rushing thunder of the enemies' wings and their voices bellowing for blood.

The last of the little band was pouring through the hill-cleft now, Kern almost the last of all with his limp burden hanging across his arms. The air was full of twisting vapors and he could not see very clearly as he swept closer to the hills. It was, curiously, a nightmare sensation, half-blindness from the poison vapors and half-deafness from the roar of wings and voices. He could only follow the back of the man ahead, dimly seen through the mists. Elje hung motionless in his arms, her trailing wings fluttering a little to the measured beat of his own.

The last thing he saw as he glanced back was Gerd poised above the cleft to follow him in, ready to fight a rear-guard action if need be. And then, all in one brief glance between drifts of vapor, Kern's heart contracted as he saw two more winged shapes beating desperately toward him through the dimness, two men flying tandem with a harnessed burden between them.

It was Bruce Hallam's bearers. And Elje had been right. Bruce's weight was too great for the flying men to carry fast enough. Evidently they had been left too far behind to follow the other bearers in and had only now made up the distance which would save them.

Or would it save them?

In spite of himself, Kern tilted his wings and hesitated in the air, twisting his head to watch. He saw Gerd gesturing savagely to hurry them in—heard the hunchback's deep howl.

"Drop him!" Gerd howled. "Drop him and come on!"

But before they could obey, a cone of white fire swept silently through the coiling fog and enveloped bearers and burden alike in a bath of radiance.

There was no sound, except for the all-encompassing uproar of the pursuit. In silence the doomed fliers stiffened and glided an instant still carrying their fatal weight between them—and then dropped.

The three of them vanished together into the engulfing mists.

Kern flew on with Elje.

He labored on leaden wings through the fog. Whiffs of burning vapor stung in his nostrils and set his pumping lungs on fire. Elje was an almost unbearable weight in his arms.

Coughing, choking, ready to think every wing-beat his last, he stumbled through the air in the wake of the man before him, his only guide through this aerial labyrinth of poison. Hot updrafts caught him and tossed him aloft, cross-currents fetid with strangling vapors sent him into perilous side-slips toward the jagged black peaks dangerously near. At this speed he knew he could not survive the slightest contact with those knife-edged rocks.

And Bruce's loss was a heavier burden to bear than even Elje's dead weight. For only Bruce could have opened the doors for the rest to escape into worlds of their own. And upon Bruce's uncanny skill he had pinned his highest hopes of freeing this world from its enemy.

Strangling, choking, muscles aching from the strain of long flight, he reeled on in the wake of the flying outlaws.

The end of the ordeal came without warning. One moment he was flying blindly through the updrafts and the smoke, the next he found himself floating in clear still air over what seemed a great lip of rock. Winged men below gestured him down and he dropped slowly on aching wings and let his feet touch the rock gingerly.

Elje coughed in his arms as he shifted weight from wings to feet. Electrified, he looked down, forgetting everything else in this new surprise. He had been certain she was dead or dying. She opened her eyes, looked at him blindly, and let the lashes flutter down again. But at least she was still alive.

The men of her band closed around them then and one of them took Elje from his arms. Kern looked around curiously as he followed Elje's bearer across the rock.

A cavern lifted its high arched entrance before them, black rock without and within, and the lip of rock thrust out before it, black too. Above the platform, which must have been two hundred feet across, the air was still and no poisonous vapors swirled, but they still rose all around the edges of the rock and leaned together high above like a tent roof that blotted out the sky except for occasional rifts far overhead. It was like a painter's concept of Hades, even to the winged men with the hard, violent faces swarming out to meet the newcomers.

The mutants were among them. Kern told them shortly of Bruce's loss. He did not want to dwell on it, for it seemed a death-blow to the hopes of the others and perhaps to his own, too, if this world was ever to be peopled by any but automatons.

None of the mutants spoke after he had told them. The loss was a stunning one and Byrna's sad, small face grew sadder and very pale, while Kua's great blue eye filled with tears as she turned away. Sam Brewster muttered something under his breath and for an instant Kern saw the veiling secondary lids twitch across his eyes, as they always twitched when Sam was angry, in involuntary preparation to draw back.

"Sam!" Kern said sharply. Sam grimaced and turned away too, closing the secondary lids again.

Inside the cavern, on a straw mattress under a stretched crimson tent, Elje was lying. A fire burned in a crude hood of rocks, its heat cupped in the red tent and reflected back again upon the bed. Someone was holding a bowl of steaming liquid to her lips as Kern came up.

Kern watched her drain it slowly. When she lay back upon the cushions her eyes remained open and she looked around the circle of watching men with understanding dawning in her face. Color came back into it after awhile, and then she coughed again and sat up.

"All right," she said. "I'm better. What happened?"

Kern told her.

"Gerd?" she asked when he had finished. The men looked at one another inquiringly. A growl of dissent went through the cavern. No one had seen him. Someone rose on heavy wings and flapped out under the dome to search the platform outside. Gerd was not to be found. Elje's face darkened.

"We could afford to lose twenty men better than Gerd," she said. "You say he was last behind you, Kern? Didn't you hear any fighting as you came in?"

Kern shook his head. "I couldn't tell. I thought he was following me. The last I saw was Bruce and his carriers going down."

ELJE bit her lip. "I'm sorry. We'll miss him. He was one of the bravest and most loyal of us all. He's been with us only a year, but I'd come to depend more on his judgment than—" She broke off. "Well, it can't be helped. I suppose the light-cones got him. I wonder how they work." She flexed her wings and tried her muscles out experimentally. "The rays don't seem to leave any after-effects. I suppose the fatalities are meant to come from the fall. Well, at least we're lucky to have got away without any worse losses."

She got to her feet and shook her head tentatively, shook her wings out and made two or three uncertain beats that nearly lifted her off the floor.

"I'm all right now." She spread her hands to the blaze for it was damply chill in the cavern. "The Mountain's angry," she said. "It isn't only our raid on the village that brought this army out against us. There was that storm, too. Kern, I think the Mountain knows you're here and is trying to—to finish you. Have you any idea why?"

Kern had, vague theories too inchoate to put into words. He shook his head instead. Elje laughed shortly.

"Gerd wouldn't trust you. If he were here, he'd say it was your fault the enemy had

[*Turn page*]

gathered against us. He'd say to put you out and let you shift for yourselves, all of you. Is there any reason why I shouldn't?" Her voice was suddenly hard.

Disconcerted, Kern stared at her. "If you don't know any—" he began, but she broke in quickly.

"You saved my life," she conceded, "but we're not a sentimental people. We can't afford to be. If your presence here is a menace to the safety of us all, I can't indulge my own gratitude by putting my men in danger. We must each contribute to the strength of the group, or perish." She shrugged. "You're one extra fighting man, but what about your friends? Have they abilities to counterbalance their being earth-bound?"

"I think they have. This much is sure, Elje. Unless we can prevail against the Mountain somehow, I believe we mutants at least are doomed. Our coming has upset the balance in your world and the Mountain knows it and intends to be rid of us. Well, we've lost our best man, Bruce Hallam. With his help we might have moved openly against the Mountain. Without him, we are greatly handicapped." Kern grimaced wryly. "Remember, Byrna and I have been in—call it in tune—with whatever it is that constitutes the Mountain. We know what we're facing. But I don't see any choice. It's kill or be killed."

Behind him Kua's gentle voice spoke. "Kern," she said. He turned. Elje turned too, and from the corner of his eye, he saw her recoil involuntarily from the strangeness of Kua's face.

Kua's wide blue eye, with depth upon depth shining in it, was staring at the rock wall above the fireplace. Her face had a look of concentration and withdrawal upon it, as if in all but body she were miles away.

"Kern!" she said again. "There are men coming. Many men. I think they are the same ones who were following us outside." She hesitated, glancing quickly at Elje's face, her eye refocusing swiftly and then going back to the solid wall.

"Kua, you can see them?" Kern demanded. "Do you mean it? Do you know you're not looking through empty spaces now, Kua? You're looking through rock!"

The shock of realization on Kua's face as she turned to him was answer enough. "I am!" she gasped. "It never—that hasn't happened before. Kern, it's true that we're changing. More than we know, until something like this happens! But I can see them. I can see through the side of the mountain."

Again she turned to stare with her fathomless gaze into distances no human eye ever pierced before, unaided.

"They're coming," she said. "Through the mists, the way we came."

Swiftly Kern told Elje what she had said. Elje leaned forward abruptly.

"Through the labyrinth?" she cried. "But they can't! No one can come that way without a guide. They won't get far before they're overcome by the gasses."

"They have a guide," Kua said in a strangely gentle voice, turning her gaze upon Elje. "Your friend. Gerd."

CHAPTER VI

Betrayal

HORRIFIED silence filled the cave for a moment when Kern ceased his translation. Then bedlam broke out. The encircling men who had listened so far in silence burst into violent speech, some deriding Kua's claim, some cursing Gerd. Elje silenced them with a sharp command.

"I don't believe you," she said flatly. "Gerd wouldn't betray us."

Kua shrugged. "You'd better prepare to meet them," was all she said.

For a moment Elje's composure broke. "But I don't—it can't be Gerd! He wouldn't! Kern, how *can* we meet them? They're a hundred to our one! This was our last refuge. If they're coming here, all is lost!"

"They don't know we're expecting them," Kern said. "That's our only advantage. Make the most of it. Is there any room for ambushes along the way?"

Elje shook her head. "It's almost a single-file path everywhere. And Gerd knows it better than even I do." Her wings drooped. Listlessly she stared into the fire. "This is the end of all resistance to the Mountain," she said. "This is the day *it* wins the fight. None of us can come out alive. Gerd! I can't believe it!"

"The Mountain—you think?" Kern asked her.

"It must be that. He passed all our tests—and we have rigid ones—but somehow he must have been able to hide the truth from us. He's one of the Mountain's slaves and,

when it commanded, he had to obey."

"That proves it!" Kern said suddenly. "Why should the Mountain move against you today of all days, unless it has something to fear? Gerd's been with you a year, you say. The Mountain could have struck any hour of all that time. But it waited—for an emergency. And this is the emergency. If it's afraid of us, then maybe we're stronger than we know. Maybe—"

From the mists outside the high, hollow notes of a horn broke into his speech. Kern spun around. Voices rose in angry babble from the platform. There was a beating of wings that made a noise almost deafening under the dome of the cavern, and the fire flared wildly, the red canvas of Elje's tent flapped in the blast as the outlaws rushed to the defense of their last refuge. Elje, shouting commands, rose with them.

Kua and Byrna turned white faces to Kern. Sam Brewster, behind them, looked a question. Rapidly Kern told them what had been said.

"You'd better wait here," he finished. "I don't know what's coming, but you'll be safer inside."

Sam smiled a grim and dreadful smile. "I can help," he reminded Kern. "I'll come outside."

Together they walked to the door of the cave. There was tumult beyond, but an orderly tumult. Ranks of the winged outlaws were hurrying aloft to hang overhead in wait. Elje marshaled the rest with a hopeless sort of efficiency into reserves. Before she had finished, the horn sounded again, on a note of triumph, and the first of the enemy burst through the fog upon them.

"You see," Elje said to Kern, the hopelessness clear in her voice. "They wanted us out in the open where they could finish us quickest. They even gave warning so we'd be waiting for them. That's how sure they are of us."

From the front of the platform a wave of the outlaw fighters, knives flashing in their hands, rose to meet the newcomers. And from above a second wave dived on half-closed wings. For a few moments there was a bloody melee at the mouth of the aerial entry where the enemy poured through.

"We can hold them five minutes," Elje said. "After that, we're through."

Now for the first time Kern saw how the winged men fought. The hawk-dive was the thing he thought of as he watched the fighters swoop on their prey, saw the flash of knives held at an expert angle for the slash that would cripple wing-muscles and send the victim hurtling helplessly to the ground. One sweeping cut across the chest-muscles was enough to put a man out of the fight.

But if the intended prey saw his adversary coming, then it was a matter of soaring and swooping for position. And Kern saw many times a winged man, outmaneuvered by his enemy, rise on desperate wings and hurl himself headlong into a death-like embrace, wings folded, so that the two fell like a single plummet, each striving frantically as they dropped twisting through the air for a blow that would cripple his adversary and break the wing-locked grip before the ground came too near.

Now the gush of the enemy through the fog had become too great to stem as they poured by the score out of their narrow entry. The fight which had for a few minutes hovered at the mouth of the gap swept backward and upward until the great tent of vapor over the platform was filled with struggling men, and the air was blackened with the shadows of their wings.

"They aren't using those light-cones," Kern said. "I've been waiting to dodge but none have come through yet. Why?"

"I think because the Mountain sends out the light-beam that focuses through the wires," Elje told him. "That's the way their weapons usually work. And the Mountain can't penetrate our mists and our rocks here. They've got to fight hand-to hand—but they can do it. There are too many of them. I—Kern, look! Is that Gerd?"

A FLASH of red wings and red hair showed through the melee as someone went by on whistling wings, too fast to see clearly. Kern caught one glimpse of a dark face and pale, fixed eyes—and thought there was grief in the eyes and the distorted face in that one glancing look he caught of it.

Elje, beside him, shouted something across the platform and from its lip another wave of men rose in the hopeless defense of their stronghold.

"We'll go up with the last," Elje said quietly, glancing over her shoulder at the men who remained. "One more wave and then—the last. This way we'll kill the greatest number before it's over. Have you a knife, Kern?"

As she spoke a man with a dripping knife soared past them over the edge of the plat-

form, blood falling from a dozen wounds, face set in blind, fanatic violence. Squarely before them they saw him falter in midair, his gaze going past them to something in the shadow of the cave. Abruptly then he stiffened, his chin jerked up and his wings folded back as if they had been suddenly broken. He fell in a long slide, momentum-borne and inert, and crashed at Elje's very feet.

She had her knife at his throat in a swift, lithe crouch before she saw that no knife was necessary. Bewildered, she looked up at Kern.

He stooped and took the wet blade from the man's hand, wiped it on his leather jerkin.

"Don't look back, Elje," he warned her harshly. "Sam? Sam!"

"It's all right, Kern." Sam Brewster's voice had a dreadful sort of amusement in it. "I'm not—looking."

Elje stared, speechless, into Kern's face as the other mutant sauntered up to join them in the shelter of a heap of rock at the edge of the platform. Sam's smile was thin and cold. The secondary lids veiled his eyes, but a gleam in their depths glittered even through the film and Kern looked hastily away.

"What—what is it?" Elje faltered. "What killed this man?"

"I did." Sam was grinning without mirth. "Like this."

He turned away, face lifted, scanning the turmoil overhead where men dived and soared on blood-dappled wings, clasped one another in deathly embraces and hurtled earthward with knives flashing between them. At the edge of the platform, only a dozen feet overhead, such a pair writhed in gasping, murderous combat. As they watched, one man freed his knife-hand and in the same motion drove the blade hilt-deep into the other's chest!

The killer's wings spread and stiffened in anticipation of what was to come, as his victim clutched convulsively at his shoulders in a last effort to save himself. For an instant one man's wings supported them both. Then the dying man's body went limp. Wings flaccid, he fell away from the blade and went hurtling downward through the mists, twisting and turning over while blood pumped from his chest.

The killer paused for a moment in midair, breathing in deep gasps and looking for another adversary. His glancing eyes crossed Sam Brewster's. For an instant he hung there, panting for breath, gaze locked with Sam's.

The knife dropped from his loosened fingers. Eyes still wide, he heeled over in the air stiffly. His wings broke backward and he fell after the man he had just killed. They vanished almost together into the fog below.

Sam laughed grimly. When he turned the secondary lids were closed again over his eyes.

"I can kill anyone who catches my eyes, when they're open," he said.

Elje did not understand the words, but his gesture was enough. She caught her breath softly and looked away in sheer instinctive revulsion from that deathly gaze.

"Elje, we've got to do something," Kern said. "Now, while we can. We've got Sam. Kua and Byrna have their own powers, too. There's no use waiting here to be killed. If only we could get away."

"Where?" Elje asked somberly. "The Mountain could find us wherever we went."

"We could go to the Mountain." Kern's voice was more confident than he felt. "If it's so anxious to see us dead, then it must be afraid of us. Anyhow, that's our only hope. Is there any way out except the way we came here?"

Elje gestured aloft. "Only up. And you can see how thick the vapors are."

Kern glanced around the platform. There were perhaps fifty men remaining on their feet, waiting to be thrown into the last wave of the defense. He looked toward the cave-mouth and beckoned. Kua and Byrna hurried across the platform toward him, their faces pale and anxious.

"Kua," he said. "A little while ago you found you could look through walls. Look up. Do you think you could tell which of those vapors up there are poisonous and which aren't?"

Kua's face lifted; her single eye narrowed. For a long moment no one spoke.

"No, I'm not sure," she said. "I can see a long way, through to the clear air. I can see that some of the fog flows in definite patterns, much thicker than the rest. But what's poison and what isn't—no one could tell that by looking, Kern."

"Is there a path through the places where the fog's thin?"

"Yes."

"We'll have to take a chance on it, then. Maybe if it's thin enough to breathe, we can get through."

RAPIDLY he told Elje what he hoped. "There are men enough left here to give us a chance if we fight our way. Sam and Kua are worth enough to be carried. I've never fought in the air and I wouldn't be much help, so I'll carry Byrna. It's worth trying, Elje. Better than waiting here to be killed."

"Yes." Elje's voice was hopeless. "Better to die that way than this. All right, Kern, we'll go."

She turned and shouted commands to the last men around her. A few minutes later the remnant of the rebel band went soaring into the air.

The platform fell away below. It was like plunging into a maelstrom of shouts and cries, groans, gasps for breath, the deafening beat of many wings. Blood rained about them, knives flashed and fell, bodies hurtled past toward the ground. With Byrna's light weight in his arms, Kern beat heavily upward. Confidence had suddenly begun to glow in him, against all reason. They would make it. He was irrationally sure of that.

And they did. But not all of them.

Sam Brewster was the one who fell. Almost at the last, when their depleted band had reached nearly the dome of the vaporous tent, a flung knife transfixed one of Sam's bearers between the wings. He screamed, arched backward, and fell. Someone beside him dived too late for the reeling basket-seat in which Sam rode. The mutant pitched forward into space and dropped without a cry.

It would have been suicide to dive back into that maelstrom of death in an effort to catch him. Sick at heart, Kern saw him fall twisting toward the ground. He saw, too, how man after man of the swarm around him stiffened and dropped after Sam on limp wings as the mutant's lethal gaze took his own escort of dead men around him to his death.

Then they plunged into the choking mists overhead, and no one had time to think of anything but his own breathing, his own urgent need to follow exactly in the wing-path of Kua's bearers as she guided them through the fog.

* * * * *

Like a gigantic thunderhead the Mountain lifted its clear, pale bulk into the zenith. The mind quailed from the very thought of such height; it seemed to lean forward over the fliers and hover for a monumental collapse that would crush the world.

When they drew close, Byrna shuddered in Kern's arms and turned like a child to clasp his neck and hide her face on his shoulder.

"I can feel it," she said in a muffled voice. "It's watching. It's trying to—to get into my mind. Don't think, Kern. Don't let it reach you!"

Kern was briefly aware of a hot, coiling ribbon of hatred that moved through his brain and was gone as his mind slammed its gates of thought against the intruder. It was not easy to force his wings to carry them onward when his whole mind rebelled against drawing any nearer to the Mountain. He saw revulsion on the faces around him too, and caught uneasy glances cast sideward at his face. Their pace had perceptibly slowed.

"I don't like it either, Elje," he said to the winged girl across the swimming void that flowed past far below. "But we've got to do it. What choice have we, except to be killed? They may be following us from the cave already. Our only hope's to reach the Mountain where we *may* do a little damage before—" He did not finish. There was no need to finish.

Now they were so near the wall of opalescence rising like the end of the world before them that Kern could see their own reflections floating distorted high up on the face of the cliff.

"Is it glass?" he asked.

"No one knows." Elje controlled a shiver. "No one who came close enough to find out ever returned. It may be just a—a solid mass. I don't—" She had glanced across her shoulder to answer him. Now her gaze went further.

"They're following," she said in a dull voice. "If it *is* solid, we're trapped."

Kern looked back. In a dark mass like a low, level cloud on the horizon, the winged ranks of the enemy moved in their wake.

Kua suddenly pointed.

"Look ahead," she said. "Up there on the cliff, to the left—is it a cave? I—why, it's opening wider!"

Everyone looked eagerly. There was a moment's silence. The Mountain too seemed to wait and listen. But Kern saw no change in the face of the cliff. Unbroken, unshadowed, opalescent, it lifted before them.

Wind sighed past them toward the cliff, ruffling their wings. The sigh grew stronger —was a rising sough of sound—a sough that soared to an ear-stunning shriek. Headlong

they whirled toward the Mountain, helpless, drawn upon that sudden irresistible wind. Kern clutched Byrna tighter and fought his wrenched wings as the cliff rose up in his face, like a solid cloud.

Dimly he could make out the shape of the opening at the same moment it engulfed him. Stunned with surprise, he went tumbling into the cliffside on that sucking wind, half-blinded by the opalescent mist which filled the tunnel. It was like spinning through a solid, for the impalpable stuff they flew through was indistinguishable to the eye from the stuff of the Mountain itself.

Light dimmed behind them as they were drawn helpless in tumbling flight deeper and deeper into the heart of the cloud—the Mountain—there was no term for what it was they sped through.

The wind that bore them along slowed. The deafening noise of it fell and was a sigh, a whisper—silence. For an instant they hung in opalescent nothingness, gasping for breath. Then Kua's voice sounded sweetly in the hush.

"Look back—look back! I can see the way we came. I can see it closing. Like water flowing together. No, like running sand."

Kern ceased to hear her. For suddenly he was aware of an almost imperceptible thickening in the mist around him. Something not seen, but felt. A closing and a supporting, so that the weight of his body and Byrna's no longer hung wholly upon his wings. A solidifying in the very air.

He could not move.

CHAPTER VII

Combat

RELENTLESSLY the Mountain which had opened to receive them had closed again, gently and solidly. The little group of captives hung frozen in the very postures of flight, spread-winged, hair still blowing in a wind which no longer moved past them. They were frozen as if in a moment of eternal Now, as if time had ceased to move and their own motions had ceased with it.

And then before them in the opalescent cloud of the Mountain a thin coil of light began to glow.

Swiftly it grew clearer. And Kern looked with the eyes of the body upon that which he had seen before with the eyes of the mind. He felt the malevolence beat out at them before the fire itself came wholly into focus, strong hatred, curiously impersonal. It was the hatred of a Mountain, a cloud, not a human hatred.

The lazy, coiling ribbon moved through the solid fog, the foggy solid glass, somewhere ahead of the captives. It was impossible to gauge distances here, but the thing was close enough to see in every detail. Its slowly writhing coil that drew in and out of its own folds with a leisurely, never-ending motion. Its burning color that was hot to the eye and hot to the perceptive mind with the heat of its consuming hatred.

Something lay within the coils. It was drawing its ribbon-folds caressingly about that something. They could not yet see what.

For an instant or two the great, slow, burning thing moved in its long folds before them, blind and impersonal and hating. But then came a new change. Then it looked at them.

Spots of luminous darkness began to swim slowly through the coils. They came and went. Whenever a coil moved itself to face the captives in the solid glass, eye-spots swam upon that coil, flickering out again as the fiery curve moved on.

It watched. It waited and hated and was silent.

That which lay within it, bathed in the caressing coils, began to move. The coils altered their pattern to leave what they supported visible. And Kern felt a shock of emptiness within him that made the vision blur for a moment. When he looked again it was unmistakable and clear before him.

Bruce Hallam, lying quietly on the supporting coils, his eyes open and regarding them as impersonally as the eyes that came and went upon the ribbons of fire.

"This—" Bruce Hallam said clearly "—is my world."

The words came to them as if through empty air, with a cold clarity that allowed of no mistake. For it was not wholly Bruce Hallam who spoke. It was a voice of fire too. Hatred and blinding light coiled through the words as it coiled through the fog before their eyes. Two beings spoke with the single voice, but two beings who were now one.

Sudden memory flashed through Kern's mind. He saw the long-ago, far-away room again, where the little group of mutants had stepped from one universe to another. He saw Bruce opening his steel door upon a

waiting world, searching it with his eyes, closing the door again. He understood now. Bruce had known. Somehow, he had known in the single glance which world held kinship for him and which did not.

Bruce, with his mutant's uncanny skill at creating out of any means at hand the more-than-machinery which would do his bidding, had recognized this world. Kern remembered with shock his own blindness when Elje had described to him what the Mountain's slaves, under its guidance, could do with any material at hand—how, when they still suspected Kern of complicity with the enemy, they had cleared his room of any matter out of which he might build a weapon to destroy them.

Yes, this world was Bruce Hallam's—not Kern's after all. A winged world, yes, but a world under dominance. And Bruce's was the dominant realm.

All this flashed through his mind with the swiftness of a single thought, while Bruce's coldly burning words still sounded in their ears. He was remembering how impersonal Bruce had always been, how remote from human feeling, when he heard the cold voice again.

"There is no place in my world for you," Bruc told them calmly. "There is room only for the winged people—and Me. You come from malleable flesh, a malleable heritage. I can not trust you here. My coming into the world made a cyclone here in the Mountain, drawing out forces better left untouched. I was helpless then. I could not save—myself—until I was out of your reach. The time has come to destroy the last remnants of those who defy me. And you mutants whose flesh I can not control must go with the rest."

He did not stir, but the coiling flame moved with sudden quickened speed, flowing toward them *through* the imprisoning glass which held the humans so inflexibly. Bruce, then, was only the voice of this dreadful duo. The ribbon of flame was the body.

A long loop of it moved lazily forward, falling gently like a silk ribbon through air. After it the fiery length followed gracefully, weaving in and out of its own folds, and within the folds, always caressed by them streaming over and around his body, Bruce Hallam moved too, rigidly, supported on the coiling loops, not a muscle of his own limbs stirring.

KERN watched them come. He had no idea what would happen when the burning coils touched the first human, but he could feel the white heat of its malevolence flow before it. Helpless, voiceless in the grip of the unyielding glass, he strained fiercely for—for—he did not know what. Only to be free to fight even uselessly against the oncoming enemy.

Sharply the thought in his mind broke in two. He had known this cleavage before, but the utter strangeness of it stunned him for a moment so that his thoughts went blank while something, *something* stirred incredibly through his body.

The old feeling of change, of unutterable newness, of an unguessed sense opening within him like nothing man ever knew before.

Three times he had known this feeling since he stepped into the winged world. Three times he had crushed it down, fearing and hating it for its threat of making him alien again, alien to the winged people he had hoped would be his own. But this time he did not fight. This time, in the violent, straining effort to break free, he broke instead some barrier which had until now held back the new thing, the *something* which had burgeoned relentlessly within him ever since he came within the Mountain's realm.

The glass walls that held him like a prisoner in ice grew dim and vanished. His companions pilloried in glass beside him wavered into darkness. He no longer felt the warmth of Byrna frozen in glass in his arms. Everything was dark—even the slow—coiling ribbons that looped leisurely toward him through solid substance.

And then out of that darkness came light. All about him came light. And it took a long moment for him to discover he was not seeing that light with eyes. He was seeing it—incredibly, impossibly—with his whole body. He saw everything around him in one all-encompassing range.

"This is the way the Mountain sees," he knew with sudden certainty. How he knew it was not clear; it was a knowledge that came with the new vision. He and the Mountain, they shared a common faculty.

Motion far away caught his fathomless attention and he was looking out through the clouded side of the Mountain and seeing, as if he stood before them, the flight of the oncoming winged men who had followed the fugitives from the eyrie. They were nearly here now, approaching the monstrous cliff as blindly as if they meant to dash themselves to death against it.

With the same all-embracing sight, Kern

was aware of the people frozen around him into the glass, and of the looping coils that flowed toward them, and of Bruce Hallam, rigid as an image of stone, moving with the moving ribbons.

But they looked very different now. The people.

He knew their faces, the familiar outlines of their bodies, but he could see through the bodies with his new vision. And the appalling thing he saw was not the structure of bone and muscle and nerve which a part of his mind expected there. These things were only pale shadows upon the—the *other*.

The people were rings of flat, luminous color, disc upon disc of it, superimposed, overlapping, no two people with the same patterns or the same colors. And he knew that the muscular structure humans are aware of, the skeleton, the nerves, are only a part of what comprises them. Only a part—and not the part important to the Mountain. The Mountain ruled by other means.

Every flying man approaching outside the cliff had one thing in common with his fellows. Each was made up of ring after ring of colors, brilliant arcs and half-moons lying one upon another and in continual delicate shifting motion. But in each, and moving slowly over the rings, a circle of luminous darkness swung. Darkness like the eyes which swam up to the surface of the coiling ribbons that embraced Bruce Hallam. An eye—the eye of the Mountain.

That was the thing the Mountain used in them to transmit its commands, then. The point of contact in each man that made him a slave when the orders came.

There was no such eye in any of the people imprisoned around Kern. He saw his own body with this new vision, rings and discs of color like the rest, and with no dark, circling spot that meant the Mountain owned him.

The Mountan is a creature of glass, he told himself clearly. Its body is this opalescent stuff which is solid or gas as the Mountain wills. It can make tunnels and caverns like open mouths through it and close them again. And its brain, its motivating force, is the ribbon of fire, endless, revolving upon itself in the center. It has many strange senses. One of them I share now.

He thought: When we came here, we somehow brought on a cyclone of violent forces drawn from the Mountain itself. Because Bruce Hallam had an inhuman kinship with the entity which dwells here. But it was an entity so strong, so accustomed to mold the minds of its victims and use them like tools to create other tools, that we ourselves were reshaped without knowing it.

This strange new sense began very early to take shape in me. Kua reacted too, and Byrna. Sam? I don't know. He's gone. But as for me, I have changed.

Something stirred mysteriously through his flesh, and without the need to look down, Kern's horizon-circling vision told him that light had begun to glow in him—fire—long, rolling loops of fire that stretched with incredible flexibility *through* the solid glass imprisoning him.

THE ribbon of fire upon which Bruce's body rode paused in its motion, hesitated, almost drew back. Kern felt dimly its surprise and its strange, inhuman hatred. But only dimly, for his own mind was too stunned with this final revelation to let any other feeling through.

Too malleable, he thought despairingly—flesh too malleable to hold its own form under the irresistible altering pull that was the Mountain. And now through the icy glass which held the humans rigid, two shapes of coiling flame turned lazily over and over—one shape supporting a human body and glowing incandescent with malevolence, the other still too amazed for emotion, but stretching its new limbs of fire with a sort of reluctant, voluptuous luxury as the endless ribbon rolled in convolutions of flame in and out of its own length. A strange, inhuman luxury, this, to stretch upon the firm, permeable glass, moving through it as light might move, in a dimension of its own.

Hatred like a blast of furnace-heat struck upon Kern's new awareness with an impact that jolted him out of this bewildering mental fog. Hate and fear. He had felt that blast before, invisibly in the voids of thought, and terror had come with it so that he fled blindly to escape. But this time fear did not follow after the hate. This time he welcomed conflict.

"Now we're equals—matched equals," he told himself, and felt even in this moment of danger and surprise the utter difference of his own mind through which thoughts moved slowly and clearly, like his new limbs through the solidity of the glass. If he had ever owned a body of flesh and blood, it was his no longer. If his mind had ever dwelt there and shaped its thoughts to the contours of brain and skull,

they were shaped no longer. This was new, new, terrible and wonderful beyond human understanding.

Slow exultation began to burn in him as he rolled the great coils of fire which were his body toward that which until now had dwelt here alone. Now the Mountain had a double mind—if the fiery ribbon was indeed the mind of the thing—but moving still through a single gigantic body of opalescent glass. And within that vast body, the doubled mind moved upon itself in suicidal combat.

Hatred was a bath of flame that engulfed him as their farthest coiling loops touched—touched and engaged with sudden violence. But Kern was not afraid now, not repelled. With a surging lunge he tested the strength in that shape which was the twin of his own. The ribbons writhed and strained. Then they paused for a moment and drew back in mutual consent. And simultaneously, as if hurled by a single mind, lunged forward again.

This time the fiery limbs entangled until their full endlessly revolving lengths were wholly engaged with one another and the two identical shapes of rolling fire strove furiously together in a single knot that boiled with ceaseless motion.

Hatred burned and bubbled all around Kern's awareness as he strove coil against coil with the enemy. But it did not touch him any more. He felt no fear. And when he began to realize that he could not vanquish this being by strength alone, not even then did he feel fear. Emotion was gone from him. Coil by coil he tested the thing he strove with, and coil by coil he found it braced irresistibly against his greatest strength. He could not swerve it by a single loop.

But it could not swerve him. Matched in strength as they were in shape, the two creatures of flame lay for a moment upon the clouded ice, limb straining against limb in a perilous balance that permitted of no motion.

Then, very delicately, the awareness that had been Kern reached out with a sense he had not until this moment known he possessed, and touched the frozen body of Bruce Hallam. For he knew now that he and this enemy were too perfectly matched for either to prevail, unless one or the other found a lever by which his adversary could be overthrown.

Was it Bruce? Gently, and then with increasing pressure, he tried that rigid, unyielding body which had once been human. There was nothing—nothing. Not even the discs of overlapping color which the still-human exhibited to his new sight moved through Bruce's limbs. He was solid, unmoving, a shape of nothingness, and no sense could touch him. No, Bruce was not the source through which strength might be drained from the enemy.

What, then? Kern asked himself with passionless consideration. And the answer came clearly and unhurried, as if it had waited only this query to reply.

The winged men waiting outside the mountain—that was the answer.

Almost outstripping the thought, his sight and his strange new senses leaped to the surface of the Mountain. There the slaves hung on stretched wings, tilting to the updrafts from below, circling and soaring and waiting in mindless obedience for the command that would release them from their mental thrall.

Once he had seen them as winged humans fighting with fanatic violence. Now they were only shapes of overlapping discs, full of slowly turning motion, and in each the Eye of the Mountain swimming leisurely over the surface of the colors.

The Eye, he thought. The Eye!

LIKE a new, unguessed arm his awareness shot out and plunged into the nearest spot of darkness which swam over the colored discs. Plunged in—groped for contact—and tapped a source of flame. Up through the arm the flame leaped, and into Kern's body of matching flame. Almost imperceptibly he felt the straining coils of the enemy give beneath the pressure of his own.

Another, and another and another of the flying shapes gave up its tiny source of fire, and Kern's strength grew with each. The combat which had hung motionless in mutual violence now writhed suddenly into action again as the balance was destroyed. But the fury of the enemy seemed to double too as it felt itself bent backward upon its own fiery coils.

What had been combat before the stasis turned into abrupt turmoil now. The two ribbons of flame convulsed together, lashing and whipping into an incandescent fury of struggle. And Kern knew in a timeless moment or two that even this was not enough. He must find some last source of power to give him the victory.

The arm with which he had robbed the flying men of their Eyes groped, plunged deep-

er, seeking more power within them. And amazingly, found it.

For an instant Kern could not understand why strength in a full, deep tide flowed into him as the light began to fail in his enemy. And then he understood, and a surge of triumph for the first time glowed through his whole being.

For in giving its strength to its slaves, that it might command them, the Enemy had opened a channel which ran both ways. And in draining the slaves, Kern found himself draining the Enemy itself—reaching back and back through each slave into the source from which that strength came.

From a score, a hundred channels, the Mountain must have felt its own power drain away. Its power, but not its hate. Kern could feel the sheer, inhuman malevolence burning about him in great washes of flame as the strength of the coils against his grew steadily weaker. The fire sank down within it, dimming and fading as the creature bled its own power away—bled flame, and slowly, slowly died!

The turning ribbons of light no longer moved against Kern's awareness. His limbs engulfed not a luminous involuted band, but a thin, pale hatred which fell apart as he drew his own body back. It fell apart into a tiny rain of droplets, each of them dancing with its own seed of hate. Twinkling, fading, and the hatred fading with them, until they were gone.

Kern felt change all about him, in the substance of the Mountain itself. A vast, imponderable shifting of the clouded glass, a falling apart of the atoms which composed it, as its soul of fire had fallen. The opalescent stuff was a fog—a mist—a thin, dissipating gas which no longer supported him. The cold of clear air struck terribly upon his fiery limbs as the Mountain dissolved from about him. He convulsed upon himself in a knot of flame that seemed to consume itself and to cease—to cease—

* * * * *

Everything was blank around him. Neither dark nor light, but void. He hung motionless upon nothing. He was no longer a shape of flame. He was no longer a shape of flesh. He was nothing, nowhere.

This was infinity, where time was not. For milleniums, he thought, he drifted there upon oblivion. Milleniums, or moments!

From far away a something began to be. He did not recognize it—he knew only that where nothingness had been, now there was a something. He heard a call. That was it, a call, a sound of incredible sweetness.

A voice? Yes, it was a voice of sheer melody, saying a name. He did not know the name.

"Kern—Kern," it cried. The syllable had no meaning to him, but the sweetness of the voice that shaped it gradually began to rouse him from his stupor. Over and over the syllable sounded, and then with a sudden blaze of awareness he knew it for what it was.

"My name!" he thought with amazement. "My own name!"

The mind came back into him, and he knew. Like Bruce Hallam, he had hung frozen and empty from the touch of the all-consuming fire which had been himself. Like Bruce, he had been emptier than death.

"Kern, Kern, come back," wailed the voice of impossible sweetness. He knew it now. Byrna's voice, lovely as a siren's magical song, summoning him back to the living.

Slowly, slowly, he felt warmth return to him. Slowly he drew his mind together again, and then his body came back around him, and with infinite effort he lifted the eyelids that shut out the world.

He lay on a hillside in the full warm tide of the sunlight which poured down from an empty sky. There was no Mountain any more. No vertiginous thunderhead of glass towering up the zenith, casting its pale shadow across the world. Someone bent over him, holding her wings to shut the sun's glare from his eyes. Her wings glistened.

Tentatively he flexed his own. And then strength came back with a magical rush to him, and he sat up with a strong beat of his pinions that almost lifted him from the ground. All around him smiling faces watched in the shadow of their wings.

And he knew that he was free at last, and the winged world was free. And he was no longer alien.

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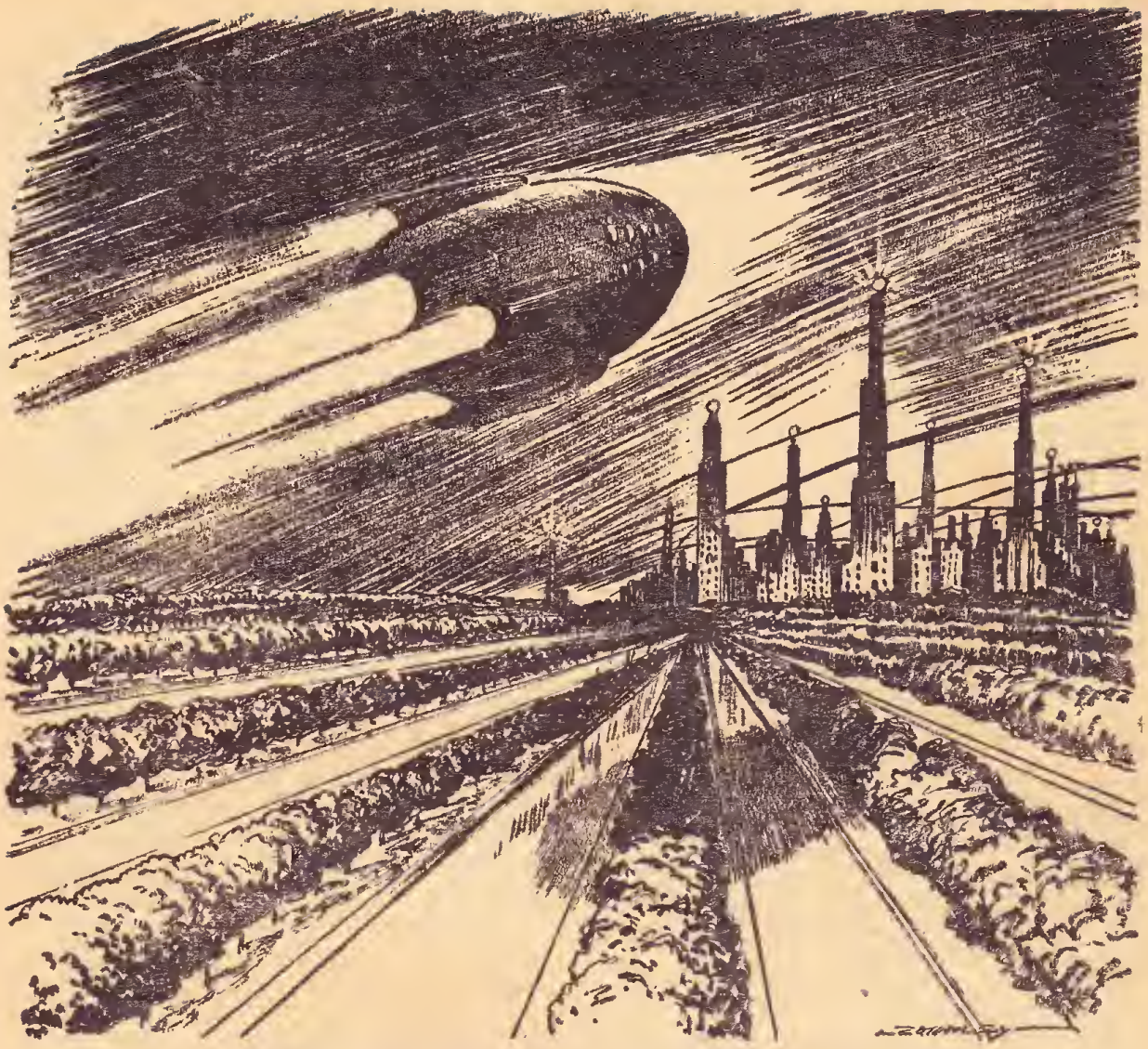


Wentworth sent the scout flier zooming in the direction of the mysterious city

SKIT-TREE PLANET

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Against an intangible distant enemy, Wentworth and Haynes battle to save their spaceship — when defeat means exile!

THE COMMUNICATOR-phone set up a clamor when the sky was just beginning to gray in what, on this as yet unnamed planet, they called the east because the local sun rose there. The call-wave had turned on the set. Bob Wentworth kicked off his blankets and stumbled from his bunk in the atmosphere-flier, and went sleepily forward to answer. He pushed the answer-stud.

"Hello, what's the trouble?" he said wearily. "Talk louder, there's some static. Oh — No, there's no trouble. Why should there be? The devil I'm late reporting! Haynes and I obeyed orders and tried to find the end of a confounded skit-tree plantation. We chased our tails all day long, but we made so much westing that we gained a couple of hours light. So it isn't sunrise yet, where we are."

Wentworth yawned as he listened.

"Oh, we set down the flier on a sort of dam and went to sleep," he answered. "No, nothing happened. We're used to feeling creepy. We thrive on it. Haynes says he's going to do a sculpture group of a skit-tree planter which will be just an eye peeking around a tree-trunk. No! Hang it, no!

"We photographed a couple of hundred thousand square miles of skit-trees growing in neat rows, and we photographed dams, and canals, and a whole irrigation system, but not a sign of a living creature. No cities, no houses, no ruins, no nothing. I've got a theory, McRae, about what happened to the skit-tree planters."

He yawned again.

"Yeah. I think they built up a magnificent civilization and then found a snark. Snark! SNARK. Yes. And the snark was a boojum." He paused. "So they silently faded away."

He grinned at the profanity that came out of the communicator-speaker. Then—back at the irreverently nicknamed *Galloping Cow* which was the base ship of the Extra-Solarian Research Institute expedition to this star-cluster—McRae cut off.

Wentworth stretched, and looked out of the atmosphere-flier's windows. He absently noticed that the static on the communication-set kept up, which was rather odd on a FM receiver. But before the fact could have any meaning, he saw something in motion in the pale gray light of dawn. He squinted. Then he caught his breath.

He stood frozen until the moving object vanished. It moved, somehow, as if it carried something. But it was bigger than the *Galloping Cow!* Only after it vanished did he breathe again, and then he licked his lips and blinked.

Haynes' voice came sleepily from the bunk-space of the flier.

"What's from the *Galloping Cow?* Planning to push off for Earth?"

Wentworth took a deep breath and stared where the moving thing had gone out of sight.

"No," he said then, very quietly. "McRae was worred because we hadn't reported. It's two hours after sunrise back where the ship is." He swallowed. "Want to get up now?"

"I could do with coffee," said Haynes, "pending a start for home."

WENTWORTH heard him drop his feet to the floor. Bob Wentworth pinched himself and winced, and swallowed again, and then twisted the opener of a beverage can labeled *Coffee,* and it began to make bubbling noises. He put it aside to heat and brew itself, and pulled out two breakfast-rations. He put them in the readier. Finally he stared again out the flier's window.

The light outside grew stronger. To the north—if where the sun rose was east—a low but steep range of mountains began just beyond the spot where the flier had landed for the night. It had settled down on a patently artificial embankment of earth, some fifty feet high, that ran out toward the skit-tree sea from one of the lower mountain spurs. The moving thing had gone into those mountains, as if it carried something. But it was bigger.

Haynes came forward, yawning.

"I feel as if this were going to be a good day," he said, and yawned again. "I wish I had some clay to mess with. I might even do a portrait bust of you, Wentworth, lacking a prettier model."

"Keep an eye out the window," said Wentworth. Meanwhile you might set the table."

He went back to his bunk and dressed quickly. His expression was blank and incredulous. Once more he pinched himself. Yes, he was awake. He went back to where steaming coffee and the breakfast-platters waited on the board normally used for navigation.

The communication-set still emitted static, curiously steady, scratchy noise that should not have come in on a frequency-modulation set at all. It should not have come in especially on a planet which had plainly once been inhabited, but whose every inhabitant and every artifact had vanished utterly.

Habitation was so evident, and seemed to have been so recent, that most of the members of the expedition felt a creepy sensation as if eyes were watching them all the time. But that was absurd, of course.

Haynes ate his chilled fruit. The readier had thawed the frozen fruit, and not only thawed but cooked the rest of breakfast. Wentworth drank a preliminary cup of coffee.

"I've just had an unsettling experience, Haynes," he said carefully. "Do I look unusually cracked, to you?"

"Not for you," said Haynes. "Not even for any man who not only isn't married but isn't even engaged. I attribute my splendid mental health to the fact that I'm going to get

married as soon as we get back to Earth. Have I mentioned it before?"

Wentworth ignored the question.

"Something's turned up—with a reason back of it," he said in a queer tone. "Check me on this. We found the first skit-trees on Cetis Alpha Three. They grew in neat rows that stretched out for miles and miles. They had patently been planted by somebody who knew what he was doing, and why.

"We also found dams, and canals, and a complete irrigation system. We found places where ground had been terraced and graded, and where various trees and plants grew in what looked like a cockeyed form of decorative planting.

"Those clearings could have been sites for cities, only there were no houses or ruins, or any sign that anything had ever been built there. We hunted that planet with a fine-toothed comb, and we'd every reason to believe it had recently been inhabited by a highly civilized race. But we never found so much as a chipped rock or a brick or any shaped piece of metal or stone to prove it.

"We found out a civilization had existed, and it had vanished, and when it vanished it took away everything it had worked with, except that it didn't tear up its plantings or put back the dirt it had moved. Right?"

"Put dispassionately, you sound like you're crazy," said Haynes cheerfully. "But you're recounting facts. Okay so far."

"McRae tore his hair because he couldn't take back anything but photographs," Wentworth went on. "Oh, you did a very fine sculpture of a skit-tree fruit, but we froze some real ones for samples, anyhow. We went on to another solar system. And on a planet there, we found skit-trees planted in neat rows reaching for miles and miles, and dams, and canals, and cleared places—and nothing else. McRae frothed at the mouth with frustration. Some non-human race had space-travel. Eh?"

Haynes took a cup of coffee.

"The inference," he agreed, "was made unanimously by all the personnel of the *Galloping Cow.*"

NERVOUSLY Wentworth glanced out the flier window.

"We kept on going. On nine planets in seven solar systems, we found skit-tree plantations with rows up to six and seven hundred miles long—following great-circle courses, by the way—and dams and irrigation systems. Whoever planted those skit-trees had space-travel on an interstellar scale, because the two farthest of the planets were two hundred light-years apart. But we've never found a single artifact of the race that planted the skit-trees."

"True," said Haynes. "Too true! If we'd loaded up the ship with souvenirs of the first non-human civilized race ever to be discovered, we'd have headed for home and I'd be a married man now."

"Listen!" Wentworth said painfully. "Could it be that we never found any artifacts because there weren't any? Could it be that a creature—a monstrous creature—could have developed instincts that led it to make dams and canals like beavers do, and plantings like some kind of ants do, only with the sort of geometric precision that is characteristic of a spider's web? Could we have misread mere specialized instinct as intelligence?"

Haynes blinked.

"No," he said. "There's seven solar systems, two hundred light-years apart, and a specific species, obviously originating on only one planet, spread out over two hundred light-years. Not unless your animal could do space-travel and carry skit-tree seeds with him. What gave you that idea?"

"I saw something," said Wentworth. He took another deep breath. "I'm not going to tell you what it was like, I don't really believe it myself. And I am scared green! But I wanted to clear that away before I mentioned—this. Listen!"

He waved his hand at the communicator-set. Static came out of its speaker in a clacking, monotonous, but continuous turned-down din.

Haynes listened.

"What the devil? We shouldn't get that kind of stuff on a frequency-modulation set!"

"We shouldn't. Something's making it. Maybe what I saw was — domesticated. In any case I'm going to go out and look for tracks at the place where I saw it moving."

"You? Not me? What's the matter with both of us?"

Wentworth shook his head.

"I'll take a flame-pistol, though running-shoes would be more appropriate. You can hover overhead, if you like. But don't try to be heroic, Haynes."

Haynes whistled.

"How about air reconnaisance first?" he demanded. "We can look for tracks with a

telescope. If we see a jabberwock or something on that order, we can skip for the blue. If we don't find anything from the air, all right. But a preliminary scout from aloft would be wiser."

"That might be sensible," Wentworth admitted. "But the cussed thing scared me so that I've got to face it sooner or later. All right. Clear away this stuff and I'll take the ship up."

While Haynes slid the cups and platters into the refuse-disposal unit, he seated himself in the pilot's seat, turned off the watchdog circuit that would have waked them if anything living had come within a hundred yards of the flier during the nighttime. Then he gave the jets a warming-up flow of fuel. Thirty seconds later, the flier lifted smoothly and leveled off to hover at four hundred feet. Wentworth took bearings on their landing-place. There were no other landmarks that would serve as guides for keeping the flier stationary.

The skit-trees began where the ground grew fairly level, and they went on beyond the horizon. They were clumps of thin and brittle stalks which rose straight up for eighty feet and then branched out and bore copious quantities of a fruit for which no human being could imagine any possible use.

Each clump of trees was a geometrically perfect circle sixty feet in diameter. There were always just ninety-two feet between clumps. They reached out in rows far beyond the limit of vision. Only the day before, the flier had covered fifteen hundred miles of westing without coming to the end of this particular planting.

WITH THE flier hovering, Wentworth used a high-power telescope to search below. He hunted for long, long minutes, examining minutely every square foot of half a dozen between-clump aisles without result. There was no sign of the passage of any creature, much less of the apparition he would much rather not believe in.

"I think I'm going to have to go down and hunt on foot," he said reluctantly. "Maybe there wasn't anything. Maybe I'm crazy."

Haynes spoke in mild tones.

"Speaking of craziness, is or isn't that city yonder a delusion?" he asked.

He pointed, and Wentworth jerked about. Many, many miles away, something reared upward beyond the horizon. It was indubitably a city, and they had searched nine planets over without finding a single scrap of chipped stone to prove the reality of the skit-tree planters.

Wentworth could see separate pinnacles and what looked like skyways connecting them far above-ground. He snapped his camera to his binoculars and focussed them, and of course, the camera with them. He saw architectural details of bewildering complexity. He snapped the shutter of his camera.

"That gets top priority," said Wentworth. "There's no doubt about this!"

The thing he had seen before sunrise was so completely incredible that it was easier to question his vision than to believe in it. He flung over the jet-controls so that the drive-jets took the fuel from the supporting ones. The flier went roaring toward the far-away city.

"Take over," he told Haynes. "I'm going to call McRae back. He'll break down and cry with joy."

He pushed the call-button. Seconds later a voice came out of the communicator, muffled and made indistinct by the roar of the jets. Wentworth reported. He turned a tiny television scanner on the huge, lacy construction rising from a site still beyond the horizon. McRae's shout of satisfaction was louder than the jets. He bellowed and cut off instantly.

"The *Galloping Cow* is shoving off," said Wentworth. "McRae's giving this position and telling all mapping-parties to make for it. And he'll climb out of atmosphere to get here fast. He wants to see that city."

The flier wabbled, as Haynes' hands on the controls wabbled.

"What city?" he asked in an odd voice.

Wentworth stared unbelievingly. There was nothing in sight but the lunatic rows of skit-trees, stretching out with absolutely mechanical exactitude to the limit of vision on the right, on the left, ahead, and behind to the very base of the mountains. There simply wasn't any city. Wentworth gaped.

"Pull that film out of the camera. Take a look at it. Were we seeing things?"

Haynes pulled out the already-developed film. The city showed plainly. It had gone on television to the *Galloping Cow,* too. It had not been an illusion. Wentworth pushed the call-button again as the flier went on toward a vanished destination. After a moment he swore.

"McRae lost no time. He's out of air al-

ready, and our set won't reach him. Where'd that city go?"

He set the supersonic collision-alarm in action. The radar. They revealed nothing. The city no longer existed.

They searched incredulously for twenty minutes, at four hundred miles an hour. The radar picked up nothing. The collision-alarm picked up no echoes.

"It was here!" growled Wentworth. "We'll go back and start over."

He sent the flier hurtling back toward the hills and the embankment where it had rested during the night. The communicator rasped a sudden furious burst of static. Wentworth, for no reason whatever, jerked his eyes behind. The city was there again.

Haynes photographed it feverishly as the flier banked and whirled back toward it. For a full minute it was in plain view, and the static was loud. Then the static cut off. Simultaneously, the city vanished once more.

AGAIN a crazy circling. But the utterly monotonous landscape below showed no sign of a city-site, and it was impossible to be sure that the flier actually quartered the ground below, or whether it circled over the same spot again and again, or what.

"If McRae turns up in the *Galloping Cow*," said Haynes, "and doesn't find a blamed thing, maybe he'll think we've all gone crazy and had better go home. And then—"

"Then you'll get married!" Wentworth finished savagely. "Skip it! I've got an idea! Back to the mountains once more."

The flier whirled yet again and sped back toward its night's resting-place. Ten miles from it, and five thousand feet up, the static became still again.

Wentworth kicked a smoke-bomb release and whirled the flier about so sharply that his head snapped forward from the sudden centrifugal force.

There was the city.

The flier roared straight for it. Static rattled out of the communicator. One minute. Two. He kicked the smoke-bomb release again. Already the first bomb had hit ground and made a second smoke-signal. Ten miles on, he dropped a third.

The smoke-signals would burn for an hour, and give him a perfect line on the vanishing city. This time it did not vanish. It grew larger and larger, and details appeared, and more details.

It was a unit—a design of infinite complexity, perfectly integrated. Story upon story, with far-flung skyways connecting its turrets, it was a vision of completely alien beauty. It rose ten thousand feet from the skit-trees about its base. Its base was two miles square.

"They build high," said Wentworth grimly, "so they won't use any extra ground they could plant their confounded skit-trees on. I'm going to land short of it, Haynes."

The vertical jets took over smoothly as he cut the drive. The flier slowed, and two blasts forward stopped it dead, and then it descended smoothly. Wentworth had checked not more than a hundred yards from the outermost tower. It appeared to be made of completely seamless metal, incised with intricate decorative designs. Which was incredible.

But the most impossible thing of all was that there was no movement anywhere. No stirring. No shifting. Not even furtive twinklings as of eyes peering from the strangely-shaped window openings. And when the flier landed gently between two circular clumps of skit-trees and Wentworth cut off the jets and turned off even the communicator—then there was silence.

The silence was absolute. Two miles high, near them towered a city which could house millions of people. And it was utterly without noise and utterly without motion in any part.

"And the prince went into the castle," said Wentworth savagely. "He kissed the Sleeping Beauty on the lips, and she opened her eyes with a glad little cry, and they were married and lived happily ever after. Coming, Haynes?"

"Sure thing, said Haynes. "But I don't kiss anybody. I"m engaged!"

Wentworth got out of the flier. Never yet had they found a single dangerous animal on any of the nine planets on which skit-trees grew, with the possible exception of whatever it was he had seen that morning. Whoever planted skit-trees had wiped out dangerous fauna. That had been one of the few seeming certainties. But all the same, Wentworth put a flame-pistol in his belt before he ventured into the city.

He stopped short. There was a flickering. The city was blotted out. A blank metal wall stood before him. It reared all around the flier and the men in it. Between them and the city. Shining, seamless, gleaming metal, circular and a hundred feet high. It neatly enclosed a space two hundred yards across,

and hence some clumps of skit-trees with the men. "Now, where the devil did that come from?" asked Wentworth.

Abruptly everything went black. There was darkness. Absolute, opaque.

FOR PERHAPS two seconds it was unbroken. Then Haynes, still in the flier, pushed the button that turned on the emergency landing-lights. Twin beams of some hundreds of thousands candlepower lashed out, and recoiled from polished metal, and spread around and were reflected and re-reflected. There was a metal roof atop the circular metal wall. Men and flier and clumps of skit-trees were sealed up in a monstrous metal cylinder. Wentworth cried furiously:

"It isn't so! It simply can't be so!"

He marched angrily to the nearest of the metal walls. Twin shadows of his figure were cast on before him by the landing-light beams. Weird reflections of the shadows and the lights—distorted crazily by the polished surface—appeared on every hand.

He reached the metal wall. He pulled out his flame-pistol and tapped at it. The wall was solid. He backed off five paces and sent a flame-pistol beam at it. The flame splashed from the metal in a coruscating shower. But nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. When he turned off the pistol the metal was unmarred. It was not even red-hot.

"The sleeping beauty woke up, Wentworth," Haynes said. "What's the matter?"

He saw Wentworth gazing with stupefaction at a place where the metal cylinder touched ground. There was the beginning of a circular clump of skit-trees. And he saw a stalk at a slight angle. It came out of the metal wall. The skit-trees were in the wall. They came out of it. He saw another that went into it.

He went back to the flier and climbed in. He turned the communicator up to maximum power. The racket that came out of it was deafening. He punched the call-button. Again and again and again. Nothing happened. He turned the set off. The dead stillness which followed was daunting.

"Well?" said Haynes.

"It's impossible," said Wentworth," but I can explain everything. That wall isn't real."

"Then we ram through it?"

"We'd kill ourselves!" Wentworth told him, exasperated. "It's solid!"

"Not real, but solid?" asked Haynes. "A bit unusual, that. When I get back to Earth and am a happily married man, I'll try to have a more plausible story than that to tell my wife if I ever come home late, not that I ever will."

Wentworth looked at him. And Haynes grinned. But there was sweat on his face. Wentworth grunted.

"I'm scared too, but I don't make bad jokes to cover up," he said sourly. "This can be licked. It's got to be!"

"What is it?"

"How do I know?" demanded Wentworth. "It makes sense, though. A city that vanishes and re-appears, apparently without anybody in it. That doesn't happen. This can—this tank we're in. There wasn't any machinery around to put up a wall like this.

"The top wasn't heaved into place either. It wasn't lowered down to seal us in. It didn't slide into position. One instant it wasn't there, and the next instant it was. Like something that—hm—had materialized out of nowhere. Maybe that's it! And the city was the same sort of trick! Maybe that's the secret of this whole civilization we're trying to trace!"

His voice echoed weirdly against the metal ceiling on every hand.

"What's the secret?"

"Materializing things! Making a—synthetic sort of matter! Making—well—force-fields that look and act like substance! Of course! If you can generate a building, why build one? We can make a magnetic field with a coil of wire and an electric current. It's just as real as a brick. It's simply different from a brick.

"We can make a picture on a screen. It's just as real as a painting. It's just different. Suppose we could make something like a magnetic field, with shape and coloring *and* solidity! Why not solidity? Given the trick, it should be as easy as shape or color!

"If we had a trick like that and wanted to stop some visitors from outer space, we'd simply construct a solid image of a can around them! It would be made of energy, and all the energy applied to it would flow to any threatened spot.

"It would draw power to fight any stress that tried to destroy it. Of course! And why should we build cities? We'd clear a place for them and generate them and maintain them simply by supplying the power needed to keep them in being! We'd make force-fields in the shape of machines, to dig canals or pile up dams."

HE HAD raised his voice as he spoke. The solid walls and roof made echoes which clanged. He stopped talking.

"Then there wouldn't be any artifacts," Haynes said calmly. "When a city was abandoned, it would be wiped out as completely as the picture on a theatre-screen when the play is done with. But Wentworth!"

"Eh?"

"If we had that trick, and we'd captured some meddlesome strangers from outer space by clapping a can over them, what would we do?" He paused. "In other words, what comes next for us?"

"Get in the pilot's seat," he commanded. "Put your finger on the vertical flight button. When you see light, stab it down so we'll shoot straight up! If we trapped somebody, and if we lifted the trap we'd have something worse than a trap to take care of them with. They'd do the same, and they've got what it should take!"

Silence followed.

"Such as?" Haynes asked at last.

"I saw one Thing this morning," said Wentworth grimly. "I don't like to think about it. If they're bringing it over to snap us up when this can is lifted off us, we're up against plenty of trouble. You keep your finger on the flight-button! That Thing was bigger than the *Galloping Cow!* I'll try to tip McRae off as to what's happened."

He settled down by the communicator. Every ten minutes he tried to call the expedition's ship. Every time there came a monstrous roar of static as the set came on, and no other sound at all. Aside from that, nothing happened. Absolutely nothing.

The flier lay on the ground with an unnatural assortment of reflected and re-reflected light-beams from the twin landing-lamps. There were four clumps of skit-trees sharing the prison with the flier and the men.

Silence. Stillness. Nothing. Every ten minutes Wentworth called the *Galloping Cow.* It was an hour and a half before there came an answer to Wentworth's call.

"—llo!" came McRae's voice through the crackling static. "Down in — gain — no sign — sort anywhere — "

"Get a directional on me!" snapped Wentworth. "Can you hear me above the static?"

"What sta—voice perfectly clear—" came McRae's booming. "Keep—talking. . . ."

Wentworth blinked. No static at the *Galloping Cow*? When his ears were practically deafened? Then it made sense. All of it!

"I'll keep talking!" he said fervently. "Use the directional and locate me! But don't try to help me direct! Take a bearing from where you find me to where a fifty-foot dirt embankment sticks out from a mountain-spur to the north. Get on that line and you'll hear the static, all right.

"It's in a beam coming right here at me. Follow that static back to the mountains, and when you find where it's being projected from, you'll find some skit-tree planters with all the artifacts your little heart desires. Only maybe you'll have to blast them."

He swallowed.

"It works out to sense," he went on more calmly. "They built up a civilization based on generating instead of building the things they wanted to use. Our force-fields are globular, because the generator's inside. If you want a force-field to have a definite shape, you have to generate it differently. Their cities and their machines weren't substance, though they were solid enough. They were force-fields!

"The generators were off at a distance, throwing the force-field they wanted where they needed it. They projected solidities like we projected pictures on a screen. They projected their cities. Their tools. Probably their spaceships too! That's why we never found artifacts. We looked where installations had been, instead of where they were generated and flung to the spot where they were wanted. There's a beam full of static coming from those mountains."

Light! With all the blinding suddenness of an atomic explosion, there was light. Wentworth had a moment's awareness of sunshine on the brittle stalks of skit-trees, and then of upward acceleration so fierce that it was like a blow. The atmosphere-flier hurtled skyward with all its lift-jets firing full blast, and there was the *Galloping Cow* lumbering ungracefully through atmosphere at ten thousand feet, some twelve or more miles away.

McRAE'S voice came out of a communicator which now picked up no static whatever.

"What the devil?" he boomed. "We saw something that looked like a big metal tank, and it vanished and you went skyward from where it'd been like a bat out of a cave."

"Suppose you follow me," said Wentworth grimly. "The skit-tree planters on this

planet, anyhow, don't want us around. By pure accident, I got a line on where they were. They lured me away from their place by projecting a city.

"I went to look, and it vanished. I played hide and seek with it until they changed tactics and let it stay in existence. Maybe they thought we'd land on it, high up, and get out of the flier to explore.

"Then the city would have vanished and we'd have dropped a mile or two, hard. But we landed on the ground instead, and they clapped a jail around us.

"I don't know what they intended, but you came along and they let the jail vanish to keep you from examining it. And now we'll go talk to them!"

The flier was streaking vengefully back to the embankment to where only that morning, before sunrise, Wentworth had seen something he still didn't like to think about.

The *Galloping Cow* veered around to follow, with all the elephantine grace of the animal for which she had been unofficially christened She'd been an Earth-Pluto freighter before conversion for the expedition, and she was a staunch vessel, but not a handy one.

The flier dived for the hills. Wentworth's jaws were hard and angry. The *Galloping Cow* trailed, wallowing. The flier quartered back and forth across the hills, examining every square inch of ground.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The search went on. The communicator boomed.

"They're playing 'possum," McRae's voice said. "We'll land and make a camp and prepare to hunt on foot."

Wentworth growled angrily. He continued to search. Deeper and deeper the flier went into the hills, going over and over every bit of terrain. Then, quite suddenly, the communicator emitted babbling sounds. Shoutings. Incoherent outcries. From the ship, of course. There were sudden, whining crashes, electronic cannon going off at a panic-stricken rate. Then a ghastly crashing sound, and silence. The flier zoomed until Haynes and Wentworth could see. They paled. Wentworth uttered a raging cry.

The *Galloping Cow* had landed. Her ports were open and men had emerged. But now a Thing had attacked the ship with a ruthless, irresistible ferocity. It was bigger than the *Galloping Cow*. It stood a hundred feet high at the shoulder. It was armored and possessed of prodigious jaws and gigantic teeth. It was all the nightmares of mechanistic minds rolled into one.

It must have materialized from nothingness, because nothing so huge could have escaped Wentworth's search. But as Wentworth first looked at it, the incredible jaws closed on the ship's frame and bit through the tough plates of beryllium steel as if they had been paper. It tore them away and flung them aside.

A mainframe girder offered resistance. With an irresistible jerk, the Thing tore it free. And then it put its claws into the very vitals of the *Galloping Cow* and began to tear the old spaceship apart.

The crewmen spilled out and fled. The Thing snapped at one as he went but returned to its unbelievable destruction. Someone heaved a bomb into its very jaws, and it exploded, and the Thing seemed not to notice.

Wentworth seized the controls of the flier from Haynes. He dived, not for the ship, but for the space between the ship and the mountains. He flung the small craft into crazy, careening gyrations in that space.

And then the communicator shrieked with clacking static. The flier passed through the beam, but Wentworth flung it back in. He plunged toward the mountains. He lost the beam, and found it again, and lost it and found it.

"There!" he said, choking with rage. "Down from the top of that cliff. There's a hole—a cave-mouth. The beam's coming from there!"

He plunged the flier for the opening, and braked with monstrous jetting that sent rocket-fumes blindingly and chokingly into the tunnel. The flier hit, and Wentworth scrambled to the forepart of the little ship and leaped to the cliff-opening against which it bumped. Then he ran into the opening, his flame-pistol flaring before him.

THERE was a blinding flash inside. The blue-white flame of a short-circuit created a gigantic arc. It died. The place was full of smoke, and something small ran feebly across the small space that Wentworth could see, and fell, and kicked feebly, and was still. Wentworth could hear a machine come to a jolting stop. And crouching there fiercely, he waited for more antagonists.

None came. The fumes drifted out the cave-mouth. Then he could see the Thing on the floor. Clad in a weirdly constructed space-suit, the creature he had knocked over

was not human and looked very tired. It was dead. Next he saw an almost typical tight-beam projector, linked with heavy cables to a scanning device.

He saw a model—all of five feet high—of the city he and Haynes had tried to reach. The model was of unbelievable delicacy and perfection. But the scanning system now was focused on a metal object which was a miniature Thing with claws and jaws and armor.

It was two feet long, and there was a cable control by which its movements could be directed. A solidity which was controlled by that ingenious mechanical toy could dig canals, or gather the crop from the tops of skit-trees—when enlarged in the projection to stand a hundred feet high at the shoulder—or it could tear apart a spaceship as a terrier rends a rat.

There was more. Much more. But there had been only the one small Inhabitant, who wore a space-suit on his own planet. And he was dead. Haynes' voice came from the flier at the cave-mouth. "Wentworth! What's happened? Are you alive? What's up?"

Wentworth went out, still in a savage mood. He wanted to see how the *Galloping Cow* had withstood the attack. What he had seen last looked bad.

It was bad. The *Galloping Cow* was a carcass. Her enginess were not too badly smashed, but her outer shell was scrap-iron, her frame was twisted wreckage, and there was no faintest hope that they could repair her.

"And — I'm engaged to be married when we get back," said Haynes, white-faced. "We'll never get back in that."

* * * * *

Less than a month later, though, the *Galloping Cow* did head for home. Haynes, unwittingly, had made it possible. Examination of the solidity-projector revealed its principles, and Haynes—trying forlornly to make a joke—suggested that he model a statuette of the last Inhabitant to be projected a mile or two high above the skit-tree plantations now forever useless.

But he was commissioned to model something else entirely, and in his exuberance his fancy wandered afar. But McRea dourly permitted the model to stand, because he was in a hurry to start.

So that, some six weeks from the morning when Wentworth had seen an impossible Thing moving in the gray dawnlight on an unnamed planet, the *Galloping Cow* was almost back in touch with humanity. Two weeks more, and the outposts of civilization on Rigel would be reached.

A long, skeleton tower had been built out from the old ship's battered remnant. A scanner scanned, and a beam-type projector projected the image of Haynes' modeling to form a solid envelope of force-field about the ship. It was much larger than the original hull had been. There would be room and to spare on the voyage home. And Haynes was utterly happy.

"Think!" he said blissfully, in the scanning-room where the force-field envelope was maintained about the ship. "Two weeks and Rigel! Two months and home! Two months and one day and I'm a married man!"

Wentworth looked at the small moving object on which the scanners focused.

"You're a queer egg, Haynes," he said. "I don't believe you ever had a solemn thought in your head. Do you know what wiped out those people?"

"A boojum?" asked Haynes mildly. "Tell me!"

"The biologists figured it out," said Haynes. "A plague. The last poor devil wore a space-suit to keep the germs out. It seems that some wrecked Earth-ship drifted out to to where one of their explorers found it. And they hauled it to ground. They learned a lot, but there were germs on board they weren't used to. Coryzia, for instance.

"In their bodies it had an incubation period of about six months, and was highly contagious all the time. Then it turned lethal. They didn't know about it in time to establish quarantines. No wonder the poor devil wanted to kill us! We'd wiped out his race!"

"Too bad!" said Haynes. He looked down at the small moving thing he had modeled for a new hull for the *Galloping Cow*.

"You know," he said blithely, "I like this model! I may not be the best sculptor in the world—as an amateur I wouldn't expect it. But for a while after we land on earth, I'm going to be the most famous man alive."

And he beamed at the jerkily moving object which was the model for the hull of the *Galloping Cow*. It was twelve hundred feet long, as it was projected about the old ship's engine-room and remaining portions. It had a stiffly extended tail and an outstretched neck and curved horns. Its legs extended and kicked, and extended and kicked.

The *Galloping Cow*, in fact, exactly fitted her name by her outward appearance, as she galloped Earthward through emptiness.

The GREGORY CIRCLE

An Astonishing Novelet

By WILLIAM FITZGERALD

Trying to connect hillbilly mechanic Bud Gregory with the mysterious atomic dust destroying America was like joining simple math and nuclear physics, but Dr. Murfree found the answer!

Gregory threw a clumsy, homemade

CHAPTER I

Chain Disaster

ON MONDAY Bud Gregory sat in magnificent idleness before the shed which was his automobile repair-shop in the village of Brandon on the edge of the Great Smokies.

That day something impalpable and invisible descended upon Cincinnati and people began to go to hospitals with their blood undergoing changes over which the doctors threw up their hands.

On Tuesday Bud Gregory meditated doing some work on the four automobiles awaiting repair in his shop, but did not feel like working and went fishing instead. . . .

On that day the Geiger counters in the Bureau of Standards in Washington went uniformly crazy, so that it was impossible to standardize the by-products of the atomic piles turning out nuclear explosive for national defense.

On Wednesday Bud Gregory reluctantly put in half an hour's work. Yawning, he took his pay for the job and went home and took a nap.

That day forty head of cattle on a West Virginia hillside lay down and died and a trout-stream in Georgia was found to be full of dead fish. Four cancer-patients in a home for incurables in Frankfort, Kentucky, suddenly took a quite impossible turn for the better. They walked out of the hospital three weeks later and went back to work.

On Thursday Bud Gregory—

That was the way of it at the beginning. Bud Gregory seemed to have no connection with any one of the series of unusual events. The events themselves were simply preposterous. As, for example, the fact that all the foliage in a ten-mile patch of mountain country in Pennsylvania turned vaguely purplish overnight, and then wilted and turned to unwholesome pulp.

Three days later there was not a green leaf or a living blade of grass in thirty-odd square miles. That did not seem to have any rational connection with Bud Gregory or any other event. But the connection was there.

switch—and the earth rocked!

It was Dr. David Murfree of the Bureau of Standards who was the first to add the various items together to a plausible sum. It did not include a backwoods automobile repairman, of course—there was no data for that—but it was a very sound guess just the same.

Murfree was a physicist, not a doctor of medicine and his salary at the Bureau was four thousand two hundred dollars a year with an appropriate Civil Service rating. He added the several odd events together, and they were convincing. But the answer was apparently impossible. He could not get any of his superiors in the Bureau to agree with him on the need for action. He thought the need was very great indeed. So he took a certain amount of accumulated Civil Service leave, drew out five hundred dollars from his bank and drove off in his battered old car to investigate at his own expense.

Tucked in the car were certain items of equipment from the bureau which he had no right to borrow and which would take most of a year's pay to replace if anything should happen to them.

He went to the sere and barren area in Pennsylvania and made certain tests. He drove to Cincinnati and made more tests. He went on to the place in West Virginia where cattle had died and asked questions and did improbable things to other ailing cows and steers. Then he drove back to Washington at the best speed his rattletrap car could make.

He went first to his home and told his wife to pack up. He explained with crisp precision and she looked at him in frightened doubt. He went to the Bureau of Standards—he was still technically on leave—and showed the

results of his tests to some of the men who worked with him.

They were still unable to use the Geiger Counters in the bureau, but one of his friends was heading for New York to use apparatus at Columbia which had not gone haywire. Murfree got him to take along his samples.

Then he went to a friend who happened to be a meteorologist—and got confirmatory bad news. The weather-maps of the period covering the unexplained phenomena told him just how likely his surmise was and where a search should be made for the primary cause of the disasters.

THEN Murfree piled his wife and small daughter in the car, drew out all the rest of the money he had in the bank and headed for the Great Smokies.

It was strictly logical action. Epidemic leukemia in Cincinnati, ruined Geiger counters in Washington, dead cattle in West Virginia, dead trout in Georgia, the sudden cure of cancer patients in Frankfort, Kentucky—and a ten-mile patch of dead vegetation in Pennsylvania.

If Murfree could have gotten someone in authority to listen to him the measures to be taken would have been quicker and much more drastic. But nobody would listen. So Murfree had to work it out on his own.

His car was old but he made Lynchburg the first day. He was not at ease. He got started early on the second day and, by nightfall, was well past Charlotte toward the mountains. He and his family stopped at a small country hotel and, during the evening, Murfree got into talk with a power-line man, who told him worriedly that power-line losses over three counties had gone up to seven times normal in two days in a smooth curve and now were headed down again.

There was no explanation. Murfree fidgeted when he heard it. He made his family sleep with closed windows that night in spite of the stuffiness of their rooms, and they started off again near daybreak.

It was about three in the afternoon when he met Bud Gregory.

Bud Gregory sat in splendid somnolence before the shed which was his repair shop. The village of Brandon was a metropolis of three hundred souls, not far within the Great Smokies. There were mountains in every direction. There was blue sky overhead. There was red clay underfoot.

Bud Gregory dozed contentedly. There were three cars awaiting his attention. Each of them had been brought to him solely because he was the best mechanic in seven states. Actually, he was much more than that—so much more that there is no word for what he was.

Each car had been brought reluctantly, because he would repair them only when he felt like it or needed money, and then would do in minutes a job anybody else would need hours or days to do. At the moment he did not feel like working and he did not need money. So he dozed.

Flies buzzed about him. Insects made noises off in the distance. Somewhere chickens cackled feebly and somewhere a wagon with a squeaky wheel moved sedately away from Brandon.

Murfree's car was plainly in trouble when Bud Gregory first heard it. Not many cars came through Brandon. The local highways were traversable by very light vehicles and they could be traveled by tractors, but mules were surest. This car was away off the main track.

It came on, booming, and Bud Gregory awoke. It climbed rather desperately over a red-clay hill and came into Brandon. It was heavily loaded. Murfree drove. There were a woman and a little girl in the back. The rest was luggage—bags and parcels of every possible shape and size and outward appearance.

But Bud Gregory looked at the car. Murfree saw his sign and steered the car toward it. He stopped it—but the motor continued to run. Murfree plainly turned off the ignition. The motor boomed on. Murfree got out and called to Bud above the noise of the engine.

"It won't stop."

Bud rose, slouched to the car and threw up the hood. He reached in. There were thunderous racketing explosions. The motor stopped dead. Then it made frying, cooking noises.

"Y'lucky," Bud drawled. "Didn't burn out no bearin's yet." Then he drawled again. "Pump-shaft broke, huh?"

"Yes," Murfree said bitterly. "I kept going in hope of coming on a repair shop. Can you fix it? Will the motor freeze up?"

Bud spoke negligently, looking at the car and all the parcels.

"Uh-huh. Oil's all burnt up in the cylinders. When she cools she freezes. But if you pour water in 'er now you'll bust the cylinder-block."

Murfree clamped his jaws. His hands clenched.

He wasn't far enough into the Smokies for his needs and that power-line-loss business meant that he had to hurry.

"Any chance of getting another car?" he asked desperately.

BUYING another car would put an impossible dent in his resources but he felt that the matter was urgent enough to justify such a step. He had two possible courses of action—this, and flight to the farthest possible part of the West. He'd chosen this because it meant a fight against the danger he foresaw.

"This here's a pretty good car," Bud Gregory drawled. "Fix 'er up an' she'll be all right."

"But it'll take days!" said Murfree bitterly. "You've got to take the motor practically apart!".

Bud Gregory spat with vast precision at a cluster of flies about a previous splash of tobacco-juice.

"She'll take a coupla hours to cool," he said drily. "That's all. No bearin's burnt. Ain't never yet seen a car I couldn't fix. I got a kinda knack for it."

"But you've got to take off the cylinder-head!" protested Murfree. "And replace the rings and fix the valves and take the pump apart and get a new shaft! No garage in the world would undertake the job in less than four days!"

"I'll do it," said Bud Gregory, "in two hours an' a half. An' two hours'll be waitin' for it to cool."

He grinned. He wasn't boasting. He was showing off a little, perhaps. But he was saying something he knew with absolute knowledge.

Murfree threw up his hands.

"Do that," he said bitterly, "and I'll believe in miracles!"

He got his wife and small daughter out of the car. He led them down to the general store of Brandon, which sold fertilizer, dry-goods, harness, perfumery, canned goods, farm machinery and general supplies. He bought the materials for a picnic lunch and he and his family came back. They sat in the car, with the doors open for coolness, and ate.

But Murfree was uneasy. Bud Gregory dozed. Time passed. The crackling, frying sounds of the overheated motor dwindled and ceased.

Presently Murfree got out and paced up and down beside the car, restlessly.

After a time he went to the back and took out a small, heavy parcel. He opened it and there was a freakish-looking metal-lined glass tube with electrical connections plainly showing it to be akin to radio tubes, but of a completely different shape.

Murfree threw a tiny switch, and from somewhere inside the box a "click" sounded. A moment later, there was another. Then two clicks close together, and a pause, and another.

Murfree watched it, worried. It clicked briskly but unrhythmically.

There was no order in the sequence of tiny sounds.

Bud Gregory sat somnolently in the shade. He turned his eyes and regarded Murfree and the box.

"What good does that do?" Murfree's wife said.

"None at all," Murfree said wretchedly. "It only tells me nothing's happened to us yet."

HE STOOD watching the box, in which nothing moved at all, but from which clickings came at brief intervals.

Chickens cackled. Somewhere a horse cropped at grass and the sound of its jaws was audible. Insects hummed and buzzed and stridulated.

The box clicked.

Bud Gregory got up and came over curiously. He regarded the box with an interested intentness. It was not an informed look, as of someone looking at a familiar object. It wasn't even a puzzled look, as of someone trying to solve the meaning of something strange. He wore exactly the absorbed expression of a man who picks up an unfamiliar book and reads it and finds it fascinating.

"What's—uh—what's this here thing do?" asked Bud, drawling.

"It's a Geiger counter," said Murfree. He had no idea what Bud was. Nobody had. Not even Bud. But Murfree said, "It counts cosmic-ray impacts and neutrons. It's a detector for cosmic rays and radioactivity."

Bud's face remained uncomprehending.

"Don't mean nothing to me," he drawled. "Kinda funny, though, how it works. Somethin' hits, an' current goes through, an' then it cuts off till somethin' else hits. What you want it for?"

CHAPTER II

Miracle

IT WAS genuine curiosity. But an ordinary man, looking at a Geiger counter, does not understand that a tiny particle at high velocity—so small that it passes through a glass tube and a metal lining without hindrance—makes a Geiger tube temporarily conductive. Murfree stared blankly at Bud Gregory.

"How the heck—" Then he said curiously, "It was invented to detect radiations that come from nobody knows where. And it's used in the plants that make atom bombs, to tell when there's too much radioactivity—too much for safety."

"I heard about atom bombs," Bud Gregory drawled. "Never knew how they worked."

Murfree, still curious, spoke in words as near to one syllable as he could. This man had said he could make an impossible repair and had the air of knowing what he was talking about.

He looked at a Geiger counter and he knew how it worked and had not the least idea what it was used for. Murfree gave him a necessarily elementary account of atomic fission. He was appalled at the inadequacy of his explanation even as he finished it. But Bud Gregory drawled:

"Oh, that—mmm—I get it. Them little things that knock that ura—ura—uranium stuff to flinders are the same kinda things that make this dinkus work. They kinda knock a little bit of air apart when they hit it. I bet they change one kinda stuff to another kind, too, if enough of 'em hit. Huh?"

Murfree jumped a foot. This lanky and ignorant backwoods repairman had absorbed highly abstruse theory, put into a form so simplified that it practically ceased to have any meaning at all, and had immediately deduced the fact of ionization of gases by neutron collision. And the transmutation of elements! He not only understood but could use his understanding.

"Right interestin'," said Bud Gregory and yawned. "I reckon your motor's cool enough to work on."

He put his hand on the cylinder-block. It was definitely hot, but not hot enough to scorch his fingers.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll fix the pumpshaft first."

He went languidly to a well beside the repair shed. He drew a bucket of water. He poured it into the radiator. There was a very minor hissing, which ceased immediately. He filled the radiator, reached down and worked at the pumpshaft with his fingers and with a speculative, distant look in his eyes, then straightened up.

He shambled into the shed and came out, trailing a long, flexible cable behind him. Up to the very edge of the Smokies and for a varying distance into them, there is no village so small or so remote that it does not have electric power. He put a round wooden cheesebox on the running-board of the car and drew out two shorter cables with clips on their ends. He adjusted them.

Murfree saw an untidy tangle of wires and crude hand-wound coils in the box. There were three cheap radio tubes. Bud Gregory turned on a switch and leaned against the mud-guard, waiting with infinite leisureliness.

"What's that?" asked Murfree, indicating the cheesebox.

"Ain't got any name," said Bud Gregory. "Somethin' I fixed up to weld stuff with. It's weldin' your shaft." He looked absently into the distance. "It saves a lotta work," he added without interest.

"But—but you can't weld a shaft without taking it out!" protested Murfree. "It'd short!"

Bud Gregory yawned.

"This don't. It's some kinda stuff them tubes make. It don't go through iron. It just kinda bounces around. Where there's a break, it heats up an' welds. When it's all welded it just bounces around."

Murfree swallowed. He walked around the car and looked at the apparatus in the cheesebox. He traced leads with his eyes. His mouth opened and closed.

"But that can't do anything!" he protested. "The current will just go around and around!"

"All right," said Bud Gregory. "Just as y'please."

He waited patiently. Presently there was a faint humming noise. Bud Gregory turned off the switch and reached down. He removed the connecting clamps and meditatively fumbled with the water pump.

"That's okay," he finally said. "Try it if y'like."

HE POKED in the cheesebox, changing connections apparently at random. Murfree reached down and fingered the water-pump. He had made certain of the trouble with his car and he knew exactly how the broken shaft felt. Now it was perfect, exactly as if it had been taken out, welded, smoothed, trued and replaced.

"It feels all right!" said Murfree incredulously.

"Yeah," said Bud Gregory. "It is. Y'car's froze, now, though. Take the handle an' try it."

Murfree got out the starting-handle from the tool-box. He inserted it and strained. The motor was frozen solid. It could not be stirred. Murfree felt sick.

"Wait a minute," said Bud Gregory, "an' try again."

He put a single one of the clamps on the motor and tucked the other away in the cheesebox. He turned on the switch.

"Heave now," he suggested.

Murfree heaved—and almost fell over. There was no resistance to the movement of the motor except compression which was infinitely springy. There was no friction whatever. It moved with an incredible, fluid ease. It had never moved so effortlessly—though the compression remained as perfect as it had ever been. Murfree stared. Bud Gregory took off the clamp.

"Try again," he said, grinning.

With all his strength, Murfree could not move the motor. Overheated, it was frozen tight with all the oil burned from the inner surface of the cylinders. Yet an instant before—

"Yeah," said Bud Gregory, drily.

He threw on the ignition switch, got into the driver's seat, and stepped on the starter. The motor fairly bounced into life. It ran smoothly. He adjusted it to a comfortable idling speed and got out.

"We'll run 'er for ten-fifteen minutes," he said casually, "to get fresh oil spread around. Then you' all fixed."

Murfree simply goggled.

"How does that work?" he said blankly.

Bud Gregory shrugged.

"Steel is little hunks of stuff stickin' together. These tubes make a kinda stuff that makes the outside ones slide easy on each other. I fixed up this dinkus to help loosen nuts that was too tight an' for workin' on axles an' so on. That'll be five dollars. Okay?"

"Y-yes—my word!" said Murfree. He fumbled out his wallet and turned over a five-dollar bill. "Listen! You eliminated friction! Completely! There wasn't any friction! Where'd you get the idea for that thing?"

Bud Gregory yawned.

"It just come to me. I gotta knack for fixin' things."

"It should be patented!" said Murfree feverishly. "What'll you make one of these for me for?"

Bud Gregory grinned lazily.

"Too much trouble. Took me a day an' a half to put it together an' get it workin'. I don't like that kinda work."

"A hundred dollars? Five hundred? And royalties?"

Bud Gregory shrugged.

"Too much trouble," he said. "I get along. Don't aim to work myself to death. You can go along now. Your car's all right."

He shambled over to his chair. He seated himself with an air of infinite relaxation and leaned back against the corner of the shed. As Murfree drove away he raised one hand in utterly lazy farewell.

But Murfree drove down the red-clay road, marveling. There had been only a two-hour delay instead of the four to seven days that any other garage in the world would have needed. Murfree drove to what he believed would be either the only safe place within a thousand miles—that or the place where he and his family would definitely be killed. But for a while he did not think of that.

He was facing the slowly-realized fact that Bud Gregory was something that there isn't yet a word for. He could not yet realize the full significance of the discovery, but it was startling enough to knock out of his head—for the moment—even the deadly danger implied by leukemia in Cincinnati and dead grass in Pennsylvania and dead trout in Georgia and Geiger counters gone crazy in Washington.

Murfree still didn't connect Bud Gregory with the danger.

CHAPTER III

Hidden Connection

DEATH fell out of a rain cloud in Kansas. A driving summer rainstorm swept across the wheatfields of the plains and

where it fell the growing wheat died. The occupants of every farmhouse on which the rainstorm beat died too in a matter of days.

The Mississippi River became a stinking broth of dead and rotting fish above St. Louis and the noisesomeness floated downstream to poison the water all the way to the Gulf—and beyond.

Dead birds fell from the skies over a dozen states and where they fell the earth went barren in little round spaces about them. A patch of the Gulf Stream turned white with dead fish. A game-preserve in Alabama became depopulated.

There were three hundred deaths in one night in Louisville. There were sixty in Chicago. The Tennessee Valley power-generating plant blew out every dynamo in five hectic minutes, during which sheet-lightning hurtled all about the interior of the generator-buildings.

Then death struck Akron, Ohio. Everybody knows about that—twelve thousand people in three days, and a whole section of the city roped off and nobody allowed to enter it, and the dogs and cats and even the sparrows writhing feebly on the streets before they too died.

It was radioactive dust that had done it. And Oak Ridge was blamed as the only possible source of radioactive dust and gas which could kill capriciously at a distance of hundreds of miles.

The newspapers raged. Congressmen—at home between sessions—leaped grandiloquently into print with infuriated demands for a special session of Congress in order that an investigation might be launched to fix responsibility—as if fixing responsibility would end the continuing disasters.

Eminent statesmen announced forthcoming laws which would destroy utterly every trace of atomic science in the United States and make it a capital offense to try to keep the United States in a condition either to defend itself or to keep abreast of the rest of the world.

Oak Ridge was shut down and every uranium pile dismantled—this to appease the public—and every available investigator was dispatched to Oak Ridge to uncover the appalling carelessness which had killed as many victims as a plague.

The only trouble was that all this indignation was baseless. Radioactive dust and gases were the cause of the deaths to be sure. But the Smyth Report had pointed out the danger from such by-products of chain-reaction piles and elaborate precautions had been taken against them.

The material which killed had not come from Oak Ridge. It couldn't have. Murfree had never even suspected it. The amount of dust was wrong. The amount of deadly stuff necessary to produce the observed effects simply couldn't have come from the atom piles in operation.

It was too much—and besides it would have killed anybody in its neighborhood at the point of its release into the air. And nobody had died at Oak Ridge. It came from somewhere else.

Picking his way desperately into the heart of the Smokies Murfree kept track of events by his car radio. Two hundred miles in—the roads were so bad that a hundred-mile journey was a good ten hour's drive—there was enough data for a rough calculation of the amount of dust and gases that must have been released.

When Murfree made his calculation sweat broke out all over his body. Such a quantity of fissioning material could not result from a man-made atomic pile. The piles that men had made were as large as were readily controllable. This was incomparably larger.

All the piles at Oak Ridge and at Handford in Washington together could not produce a twentieth or a hundredth of the stuff that had been released. Somehow, somewhere, a chain reaction had been started with so monstrous an amount of material to work on that it staggered the imagination. And it was increasing! It seemed to be growing like a cancer!

Whatever had begun a chain reaction outside of Oak Ridge and Handford and however it had become possible, it staggered the imagination. The output of murderous by-products increased day by day. It was building up to an unimaginable climax.

THERE was no danger of an atomic explosion, of course. An atomic pile does not blow up. But by the amount of by-products released, something on the order of a small but increasing volcano was at work somewhere. Instead of giving off relatively harmless gases and smoke, it gave off the most deadly substances known to men.

There could be no protection against such invisible death. Poured into the air at sufficiently high level—doubtless carried up by a

column of hot air—finely-divided dust and deadly gas could travel for hundreds of miles before touching earth. Apparently they did. Where they touched earth, nothing could live.

Not only did living things die after breathing in the deadly stuff but the ground itself became murderous. To walk on an area where the ground emitted radioactive radiation was to die. To breathe the air exposed to those rays. . . .

Murfree went desperately on in his search for the impossible source of the invisible carriers of death. He found the first evidence that he was on the right track a hundred miles from a telephone. He was far beyond powerlines and railroads. He was in that Appalachian Highlands, where life and language is a hundred years behind the rest of America.

He stopped to buy food and ask hopeless questions at a tiny, unbelievably primitive store. He tried the Geiger counter. And it clicked measurably more often than before. Twenty miles farther on its rate of clicking had gone up fifty percent. He spent a day in seemingly aimless wandering, driving the laboring car over roads that had never before known pneumatic tires.

Then he left his wife and daughter as boarders in a hillbilly cabin. His wife was not easy about it. She protested.

"But what will happen to us?" she asked desperately. "I want to share whatever happens to you, David!"

Murfree was not a particularly heroic person. He was frankly scared. But he spoke firmly.

"Listen, my dear! Something like a uranium pile has started up somewhere in these hills. It's on a scale that nobody's ever imagined before. It's so big that it's incredible that human beings could have started it. It's pouring out radioactive dust and gases into the air. They're being spread by the winds. Where the stuff lands everything dies.

"And the pile is increasing in size and violence. If it keeps on increasing, it will make at least this continent uninhabitable, and it may destroy all the life in the world. Not only all human life but every bird and beast and even the fish in the ocean deeps. And something's got to be done!"

"But—"

"I brought you so far with me," said Murfree doggedly, "because you were no safer in Washington than anywhere else. So far, death from the thing is a matter of pure chance. Wherever it's happening the ground must be so hot that a column of air rises from it like smoke from a forest fire.

"But the place where there's least smoke from a fire is close to its edge. That's why I brought you this close. You're safer here than farther away and much safer than you'd be closer."

"But you intend to go on!" she protested.

"I've got a protective suit," he told her. "I managed to borrow one quite unlawfully from the bureau. I couldn't get more. If I can get close enough to the thing to map it or simply locate it drone planes can complete the exploration. But I've got to know, and I've got to take back some sort of evidence.

"I'm going to be as careful as I can, my dear. The only hope that exists is for me to get back with accurate information. I'll take that to Washington and then I take you and the kid as far away from here as what money we have will carry us."

"And if you don't get back?"

"You'll be safe here longer than anywhere else," he told her. "In the nature of things, if the stuff rises up on a hot-air column, it won't start to drop until it's a long way off.

"We're probably not more than a hundred miles from whatever impossible thing a natural atomic pile is. I'm leaving you what money I have. It will keep you here for years. Unless something can be done, the rest of America will be a desert long before that time!

"I'm guessing," he added gloomily, "but nobody else is even doing that! They blame Oak Ridge. But the weather-maps point clearly to this area as the place from which the dust must have been dispersed."

It was not a sentimental parting. Murfree was an earnest family man who happened also to be a scientist. He had done what he could for his family's safety—and it wasn't much. But now he had to do something which would most probably be quite futile, on the remote chance that it could do some good.

If the source of radioactive dust-clouds now drifting over America were a natural phenomenon like a volcano, it was hardly likely that anything could be done about it. North America would probably become uninhabitable in months or at most a year or two. There might be some areas on the West Coast where prevailing winds could keep away the poison for a time, but it was entirely possible that ultimately the whole

earth would become a desert of radioactive sand and its seas empty of even microscopic life.

So Murfree left his wife and daughter as boarders in a hillbilly home a hundred and twenty miles from a telephone and two hundred miles from an electric light. He went on to verify the danger that he seemed to be the only living man to evaluate correctly. He still did not connect Bud Gregory with it.

CHAPTER IV

The Horror Hole

MOTORISTS drove shakily to doctors in half a dozen cities, sick and frightened. They had high fevers and all the symptoms of burns, but there was no sign of injury upon their bodies.

Then it was observed that a patch of blight had appeared upon a coastal highway. All the vegetation in a space half a mile long and three hundred yards wide had died overnight. The highway ran through the blighted area. All the motorists had driven through it.

Fish died in a reservoir connected to a great city's water-supply system. The city's water was cut off and a desperate attempt made to bring in drinking-water by tank-car. Power-lines leading from Niagara Falls were shorted by arcs which leaped across the air-gap separating the wires. Then came the deaths in Louisville.

Nobody thought about Murfree, of course. He went on doggedly, unspectacularly, in search of the thing he knew might mean the depopulation of a continent and, of course, his own death if he should succeed in finding it. He went deeper and deeper into that island of the primitive, the back country of the Smokies.

There was no flat land. Mountains were everywhere—spurs and crags and sprawling monsters of stone, with blankets of forest to their tips—patches of cornfield at slopes of thirty and forty degrees. There were bearded, ragged mountaineers with suspicion of strangers as an instinct—barefooted broods of tow-headed children—and mountains—and more mountains—and more. . . .

Murfree's progress was necessarily indirect, because he could get only the vaguest of bearings upon his objective. The Geiger counter clicked ever more rapidly. On the second day after he had left his wife behind, Murfree put on his protective suit.

He looked more strange and aroused more suspicion among the mountaineers. There were no more roads, only trails, now. The car, however, was lighter not only by the absence of his wife and daughter, but by all of their personal possessions.

He wormed his way along impossible paths, fording small streams and climbing prohibitive grades, while the noise of the Geiger counter increased to a steady, minor roar. He came to a mountain-cabin where nothing moved.

A dog lay on the rickety porch, and did not even raise its head to bark at him. Murfree got out of his car and went to the cabin. He had been so intent on the task of making progress in the direction he wished to go, that he had not noticed the fact that the foliage here was dead in patches, that everything which had been green looked sickly. He called, and a feeble voice answered him.

The family in the house was dying. He gave them water and stayed to prepare food for them. There was absolutely nothing else to be done. He knew what had happened, of course. They had been burned—painlessly, like sunburn—by the radiations from that monstrous atomic furnace which somewhere steadily poisoned the air. The burns went deep into their bodies. They had high fevers. They were languid and weak. They looked like ghosts.

He asked questions and put food and water handy for them. Then he went on. There was nothing else to do.

Only four miles farther his car ceased to have any power at all. A Geiger Counter works because it is so designed that a single cosmic ray or neutron, entering it and ionizing the gas within it, breaks down the insulating properties of a partial vacuum and allows a current to pass.

Here the air was so completely ionized that it had become a partial conductor. The spark-plugs spat small sparks. The timer worked erratically. The ignition system went haywire in air which permitted a current to pass.

He got out o[illegible].

He managed to turn it about, ready for retreat. He heaved his portable Geiger counter over his shoulder. He had a thin sheet of cadmium to shield it, so that the

source of the neutrons which made it rattle steadily could be detected. The cadmium absorbed part of the neutron-flood. It lessened the counter's rattling when between the tube and the neutron-source.

He went on, on foot. Mountains reared upward on every side, and there were thick forests on every hand, but they were dead or dying. Once in a mile or two he saw small mountaineer cabins. They showed no sign of life. He did not approach them. The people in them were dead, or so near it that nothing on earth could help them. And his protective suit was not perfect.

In any case he was receiving already a possibly dangerous dosage of radiation. Every minute of continued exposure added to his danger. He must get away as soon as he dared. But he struggled onward, over a landscape more desolate than that of the moon, because the moon has never known life, while this knew only death.

He reached a crest which was actually a pass between mountains. A steady wind blew from behind him here, and the counter roared. The cadmium plate affected it, but not too much. This must be the place for which he searched. He went on.

Presently he could look downward and see into a valley of dead trees and dead grass and dead underbrush. In its center was a circular area a quarter-mile across which was—which was somehow unspeakably horrifying.

It was bare, baked, yellowed earth. Not even the corpses of once-growing things remained upon it. It was simply red-clay baked to a tawny orange, almost but not quite at red heat, still baking from some monstrous temperature down below.

Murfree saw dried leaves borne on the wind toward it. They fluttered above it and crisped and carbonized and went skyward, smoldering. There was a steady column of air rising from this hot place as from a chimney.

At the very edge of the round area was the remnant of a log cabin. The side of the cabin nearest the sere space had carbonized and smoldered away to white ash. One wall had collapsed, facing Murfree. Wires ran from the cabin to a fence which precisely surrounded the barren place, upheld on thin metal rods. Sunlight glinted on glazed insulators.

Murfree took field-glasses and looked into the cabin. He saw a heap of ragged, scorched clothing and something within it. He saw an assemblage of improvised, untidy apparatus from which glassy gleams were reflected. He could make out no details.

Then he knew what had happened. It was not reasonable. It was starkly impossible. But it was no more impossible than welding a water-pump shaft in its place or eliminating all friction from a frozen-tight motor so that it could be started again, or, say looking at a Geiger Counter and understanding how it worked without the least idea of what it could be used for.

Murfree had a small camera and dutifully took pictures without attempting to go closer. He had no hope that the pictures would turn out. The plates were surely fogged by the radiation. He bent his cadmium plate into a half-cylinder and did his best to make sure of what he now unreasonably knew.

The results were not clean cut. They did not have that precise clarity that a really convincing test of a physical phenomenon should possess. But the edge of the barren area was sharp. It was distinct. And the neutron-flood came from the air above the bare space only.

Dust swirled up in little sand-devils above the baked earth, and spun out to invisible thinness in the column of air which rose, spiraling to the sky. It rose and rose. The air itself was radioactive, containing radioactive oxygen and nitrogen and hydrogen—from water-vapor—and all the elements in a moisture-laden breeze. It was a chimney, a whirlwind of death-laden heated gases rising to the skies. But the radioactivity of the earth—which surely made the heat and the poison—was somehow confined.

Murfree turned very quietly and went away again. He knew that he had accomplished his task as he had first envisioned it. He knew what poured deadly poison into the air. He had seen it. He could tell how to find it again. And so he must hurry.

His protective suit might or might not have preserved his life. He might already be literally a dead man, though he still walked and breathed and thought feverishly. If he could have been sure that he would live to descend into the valley and struggle to that half-burned log cabin, and utterly smash the vaguely-seen heap of wires and tubes and hand-wound coils—and if he could have been sure that it would not increase the menace—he would have done it.

His own life seemed a very small price to pay for the ending of that lifeless, motionless threat to the life of all the world.

But he wasn't sure. And the information he had—especially the fact that he knew what Bud Gregory was—was so much more important than his own life that he could not risk the loss of what he had to tell.

On the way from the place he had found, floundering on in the car that at first hardly ran at all, and then back through the tortuous way past the mountainsides of dying trees and patches of dying cornfields and the small and squalid cabins in which nothing moved, and the spectacle of a world dying about him, Murfree hardly noticed the desolation or thought about his own very probable death.

He thought with a grim concentration of Bud Gregory.

CHAPTER V

He Didn't Know It Was Loaded

THE CAR stopped again before the repair-shed in Brandon. It was close to sunset. Bud Gregory sat in a leaned-back chair against the corner of the shed. There were eight cars waiting for him to feel like working on them.

He opened his eyes and grinned lazily as the car came to a stop. The sunset colorings were magnificent. There was a strange, vast quiet all about. It was the sunset hush. Murfree stopped the motor and got out.

"Car's all right, ain't it?" asked Bud Gregory genially.

"The car's all right," said Murfree. "But I want you to do something for me."

"Not tonight," said Bud Gregory. He yawned. "I was thinkin' about knockin' off an' goin' home to supper."

Murfree pulled out his wallet. He had thought it out carefully. An offer of too much money wouldn't mean a thing to this man.

"I just want you to talk," said Murfree. "Five dollars for half an hour, just for telling me about that outfit you built for somebody—that outfit that stops neutrons cold."

Bud Gregory blinked at him.

"Neutrons," Murfree reminded him, "are the little bits of stuff that make the Geiger counter—the funny radio tube—conduct electricity. You made an outfit for somebody that would stop them."

Bud Gregory grinned.

"Now, how in heck did you know that?" he asked, marveling. "That fella wasn't likely to tell nobody, an' I ain't!"

"I know!" said Murfree grimly. "That fellow wasn't as smart as he thought he was. He's dead. That outfit killed him."

Bud Gregory was startled. Then his grin turned rueful.

"Serves 'im right," he said uncomfortably, "but it's his own fault. I told him it was dang'rous, but he done me a dirty trick. He swore he was gonna law me for the way I fixed his car. He said the way I fixed it, he couldn't sell it even if it would run.

"Then he says he'd call it square if I fixed up another kinda gadget for 'im, but I was gonna go to jail or have to pay for his car if I didn't. I told him it was dang'rous, but I didn't have no money to pay for his car. It run good, too! Better'n a new one!"

Murfree waited. He counted out five one-dollar bills.

"If he's dead," repeated Bud Gregory uncomfortably, "it ain't my fault! I told him it was dang'rous but he wanted it, so ruther'n try to pay a hundred an' a quarter or have a pack o' lawin'. I done it. It took a time, too!"

Murfree handed over one one-dollar bill.

"That's six minutes' talk," he said. "Go on."

Bud Gregory leaned back. He spat expansively.

"Don't mind this kind of work so much," he said appreciatively. "This fella come drivin' in just like you done. He'd skidded off a wet clay patch an' smashed his radiator all to smithereens. He wanted me to fix it. It was too tough a job.

"I told him I didn't aim to work myself to death, but he kept pesterin' me, so I says, 'All right. I'll fix 'er so she can run for ten dollars.' I thought that'd scare him off, but he took me up. An' I didn't know how to fix it, but I knew I could figger out a way.

"So I got to thinkin', with him pacin' up an' down waitin' for me to set to work. An' I thought to myself, 'Fixin' that radiator is a job of work! It'd be easier to figger out some other way to keep her cool!' An' then it come to me."

"What?"

"All a radiator does," drawled Bud Gregory, "is let the heat get out of the coolin' water. His radiator wasn't no good. If I fixed up some other way to take the heat out of the coolin' water, she'd run just as good an' I could bypass the radiator with a piece o'

hose. So I done it. Took me near an hour."

"How'd you take the heat out of the water?" demanded Murfree.

"Shucks!" said Bud Gregory. "I got a knack for that kind of thing. Y'know you can heat a wire by passin' a current through it. I figured you can cool a wire by takin' current out of it.

"I fixed up a wire so the little hunks of stuff that metal's made of got all lined up. Then the heat tries to knock 'em out of line, an' makes 'em pass on them—uh—them little spinnin' things that a electric current is."

MURFREE felt a crawling sensation at the back of his skull. This was uncanny. Bud Gregory was speaking of the polarization of atoms in a metal wire—which cannot be done—so that the random movements imparted by heat—which he could not know anything at all about—would set up strains which could only be relieved by an exchange of electrons, which would in turn, mean a current of electricity.

He had simply reversed the normal process of turning current into heat, and had turned heat into electricity to cool a motor. The direct transformation of heat into electricity has been a scientists' dream for a hundred years, one never accomplished.

But Bud Gregory had done it to save himself the trouble of repairing a shattered radiator.

"So," said Bud Gregory, "I stuck that wire in a hose an' bypassed the radiator. It'd take out the heat an' give current. I strung some ordinary wire under the car to use up the current. That's all.

"The car run good. He went off, but a week later he come back ragin' that he couldn't sell his car. Nobody'd buy it without a regular radiator workin'. How long I been talkin'?"

Murfee silently passed over another dollar bill. Bud Gregory was decidedly something that there is no word for. He knew intuitively the things that trained scientists have as yet only partly found out. Just as some men know by instinct where fish will be found and what bait they will rise to, Bud Gregory knew the behavior of atoms and electrons.

As freak mathematical marvels—some of them half-imbeciles otherwise—perform infinitely complex mathematics problems in their heads with no clear idea of the process, so Bud Gregory performed miracles in physics with no idea how he did it. He simply knew the right answer when a problem was presented.

Murfree felt an envy so acute that it was almost hatred. But back in the hills there was a thing that might make the world uninhabitable. And Bud Gregory had made it. He fondled the dollar bill, folding it.

"He wanted me to fix his car right, he says, an' I got mad. I told him it was righter than when it was made. An' it was! Then he says he's goin' to law me. But then he says, 'Look here! I was makin' a trip lookin' for some minerals.

" 'I got a thing that helps me find 'em, but part of it's got lost. You fix me another an' it'll save me a long trip out an' I'll forget about the car an' pay you ten dollars extra.' "

He spat with an air of luxury.

"He had a dinkus like you got, only bigger. An' he'd had a sheet o' metal that was supposed to block off them little hunks of stuff that come down out of the sky. That's what'd got lost. He says if I can fix somethin' to take its place he'll call it square, but he'll law me otherwise."

Murfree interpreted mentally. Someone had been making a trip into the Smokies in search of minerals. He had a Geiger counter. He must have been working on a hunch that uranium could be found. It was not improbable.

When Bud Gregory fixed his car in an utterly improbable fashion—as he'd fixed Murfree's—this unknown other man had understood, like Murfree. But he'd come back in feigned rage and demanded the equivalent of a cadmium shield, knowing that cadmium was unavailable.

He'd realized what Bud Gregory was—a near-illiterate with intuitive knowledge of what subatomic particles could be made to do, a knowledge as unreasoning and as unconscious as the feats of mathematical geniuses. He'd demanded an impossibility because he knew Bud Gregory could achieve it. And Bud Gregory had!

"He made me plenty mad," said the lanky man, resentfully. "He stood there sneerin' at me, sayin' if I was so smart as to fix his car so it would run an' he couldn't sell it, maybe I could fix somethin' that he needed. Either that or else."

Murfree recognized something like genius in the unknown man too. He'd taken the one infallible course to make Bud Gregory work. Threaten his leisure and sneer at his ability. Of course the unknown got what he wanted!

"So?" said Murfree.

"I fixed him up!" said Bud Gregory in amiable spite. "I fixed up a couple of radio tubes—he had 'em—an' made 'em so that they made a kind of horn-shaped—uh—block. Nothin' could go through it. Nothin'! No matter what size you fixed it, the horn 'ud be the same shape, an' you could make it any size.

"Nothin' would get through the walls of that horn. Not even them little hunks of stuff you call—uh—neutrons. I set up the dinkus an' showed him.

"His clickin' dinkus didn't click any more. It stopped them neutrons dead. An' then I says, 'Just for extra, you can run a wire around the place you camp an' set this upside down an' not even bugs can get in to crawl on you. But it's dangerous! It's dangerous!' "

He looked at Murfree, grinning.

"I figured it'd make him sick as a dog but I'd warned 'im! It ain't my fault if he stayed in it an' died!"

Murfree saw. He saw much more than Bud Gregory could tell him. He envisioned a quarter-mile circle of wire, built in a remote mountain valley. It made a horn-shaped —cone-shaped—barrier reaching down into the earth. Nothing could pass through that barrier, not even neutrons.

There is some slight radio-activity everywhere. Even rocks possess it. It is the cause of the internal heat of the earth. Perhaps the unknown man had come upon indications of uranium ore underground in that valley, perhaps not. But, surrounded by a shield through which no neutron could escape, any mass of material on earth would become an atomic pile!

A SINGLE molecule of uranium in any mass of rock will sooner or later disintegrate, giving off high-speed neutrons. Normally they travel indefinitely and are harmless. Some go up into the air and may ionize a single molecule. Some may find a fissionable atom and disrupt it.

But by far the greater number are simply lost. Because they can escape. Within a barrier from which they cannot escape, they would bounce backward and forward until, within even a limited mass of matter, they did disrupt another atom. Neutrons from that disrupted atom would then go on and on!

An ordinary atomic pile must be of a certain minimum size because it loses so many neutrons from its outer surface that no chain-reaction can maintain itself. As the size of the pile increases the number that does not escape increases faster than the number that does. There is a size where enough strike fissionable atoms before escaping to maintain the reaction.

When as many are freed as escape the pile, a chain reaction sustains itself. But when none can escape, there is no minimum size. There is no minimum purity of materials. Prevent neutrons from escaping and anything at all, of any size, becomes an atomic pile.

Murfree passed over a third dollar bill.

"Now I'm paying you to listen to me," he said evenly. "That man used your outfit and made a circular block for neutrons a quarter-mile across with the horn pointed down. Maybe a million, maybe five million tons of rock were inside it. Maybe there was some uranium in it too. None of the neutrons could escape. Each one bounced back and forth until it broke another atom. That made more neutrons bounce back and forth and break other atoms. You knew that would happen. You knew even a little pile would make him sick. But he made a monstrous one! It didn't make him sick. It killed him.

"Perhaps he intended to run it a while and then shut it off. It would have created enough radioactive isotopes by its normal working to make him a millionaire many times over. But he didn't turn it off in time! Because it killed him! And so the pile kept on working!

"Back in the mountains it's working now. There's hot air rising from it, and every breath of it is deadly poison! It goes up high and the winds spread it and presently it comes down to the ground again and kills. *He didn't turn it off!*"

Bud Gregory gaped at him. It was clear that he had never thought of such a thing. So much more than a genius that there is no word for it, he was like a child or a savage in that he could not think ahead. But he understood now. The unnameable intuition which had carried him to the achievement of a miracle had not told him the consequences of the miracle. But as Murfree pointed them out he saw.

"M-my gosh!" said Bud Gregory. He looked enormously concerned.

"Nobody can live to get to it to turn it off," said Murfree, grimly. "Maybe a plane can drop a bomb that will blast it. But it'll be weeks before I can make myself believed.

Meanwhile there's poison being poured into the air. People are dying right now.

"For five miles around that thing you made, there's not even a blade of grass alive. The people in the cabins for ten miles around are dying and don't know why. And that horn-shaped mass of ore and earth inside your field is full of more flying neutrons than any atom pile ever was.

"Suppose we turn that shield off with a bomb and all those free neutrons are turned loose at once! How far away will they kill every living thing? Fifty miles? A hundred miles?"

Bud Gregory swallowed. He undoubtedly understood more clearly than Murfree himself, now that it was pointed out to him.

"M-my gosh!" he said again. "I—uh—I didn't meant nothin' like that!"

Murfree handed him a fourth dollar bill with an indescribable sensation of irony.

"Now tell me how to turn it off without killing everybody all the way to here!" he commanded evenly. "If it kills me to do it that's all right. But if you don't tell me how to stop the thing I'm going to kill you, you know. Here and now."

He didn't raise his voice. He didn't realize that he was threatening. It simply seemed necessary. If Bud Gregory could doom a continent or a world and not be able to stop what he had created, he was too dangerous to be allowed to live.

But Bud Gregory spoke unhappily.

"I didn't mean nothin' like that! I just meant to make that fella sick as a dog. I figured he might make a little horn an' sleep in it when he camped. He'd be plenty sick by mornin'. But the dumb fool—" Then he knitted his brows. "I'll figure out something. I gotta knack for that kinda thing."

CHAPTER VI

. . . *Who Wasn't There*

JUST three days later, Murfree was back at the high hill-crest which was actually a pass between mountains. A steady wind blew from behind him. All about him the world was dead. Nothing lived. Nothing! He didn't carry the counter, now. There was no point in it.

He carried, instead, a clumsy contrivance set up in a wooden box in which canned tomatoes had once reached the village of Brandon.

Bud Gregory walked with him, anxiously holding before him a loop of wire which he said would stop the neutrons for his own protection. Bud Gregory had actually sat up at night to make the outfit for his own protection and the mass of tangled wiring Murfree carried.

They reached a spot where they could look into the valley beyond. It was literally a valley of death. There was nothing alive in it. Not one blade of grass, not one shrub, not one bird or insect, not even a bacterium. Everything was dead.

And a swirling, humming column of heated air rose skyward, snatching up deadly dust from a quarter-mile patch of earth that was quite red-hot, now. Every grain of that dust was the most deadly stuff known to men.

Bud Gregory looked. He was pale. He had come through miles of desolation. He had seen the silent cabins of the mountain-folk and the shriveled crops that they had planted. He knew that he had made the thing which had killed them. But now, looking down at the carbonized half-cabin and the heap of huddled garments in it which had been a man, he muttered defensively.

"That fella played heck! I told him it was dang'rous!"

He propped up his loop of wire so that it still protected him. Murfree silently unloaded himself. Bud Gregory made a final assembly. There were a few—a very few—radio tubes. Murfree had traced every lead in the complicated wiring, and he could not even begin to understand it.

By all modern knowledge of electronics, it would do nothing whatever. The tubes would light and current would flow and nothing would happen—according to modern knowledge of such things. But Bud Gregory had labored over it and risked his life to bring it here.

He was untutored and almost illiterate, while Murfree had spent years in the study of just such science as this should represent. So Murfree helped as a naked savage might help to set up a radio-beam, in absolute ignorance of even its basic principles.

"Like I told you," said Bud Gregory in a troubled voice, "this new outfit is like that there thing that makes that—uh—pile. Only this don't make a hollow horn. This here is solid. It won't only stop them—uh—neutrons from goin' through a place. It'll stop

'em dead in their tracks, right where they are when it hits. It's gonna make a lot of heat."

He set up what could only be a directional antenna, weirdly distorted. Later, much later, Murfree would draw the design from memory and then marvel at the pattern it would project. Now he was simply grim. Bud Gregory checked his connections.

"All I'm worried about is the heat," he said uncomfortably. "I guess we better not look."

He adjusted the weirdly-shaped antenna. He sighted by some instinctive method of his own. Then he turned his head.

"Don't look. It's gonna get hot!"

He threw a clumsy, home-made switch. And the earth rocked.

There were probably some millions of tons of material acting as an atomic pile, filled with all the monstrous energy of speeding neutrons. Then, suddenly, those neutrons stopped. Radioactivity stopped—dead. And all the monstrous power of the reaction in being, was converted into heat. It was not atomic energy at all. It was neutronic energy, which is of a different and vastly lower order. But that was enough!

The sheer expansion of stone, raised thousands of degrees in the fraction of a second, made the ground stagger. Murfree reeled as the very hill shook beneath him. There was a lurid flash of light. The dull-red glowing surface of the quarter-mile circle became instantly molten—white-hot—liquid! There was a monstrous bellowing and rumbling from the very bowels of the earth.

And then the round lake of melted earth spouted upward. Gases underground strove mightily to expand in the mass of melted magma. Lava welled up and spread and engulfed the tiny fence and the half-burned cabin and the incredibly small apparatus which had created the whole cancerous thing. Cabin and everything else disappeared in the spreading white-hot flood.

Then bubbles reached the surface. Gigantic masses of incandescent gas leaped upward. The rock was literally effervescing, boiling, bubbling in a horrible blinding froth which spouted masses of liquid stone into the sky.

MURFREE stood his ground for seconds only. Bud Gregory turned and ran and Murfree ran with him. Ahead of them a fiery mass of rock hurtled down and splashed. Fire broke out. There were other fires to right and left.

Just once, as he fled, Murfree turned his eyes backward and saw a meteor-like mass of melted stone fall upon and obliterate the apparatus they had brought and used in the pass. Murfree felt an illogical sense of relief even as he ran on desperately.

The noise died down in half an hour. After all, huge as the thing had been, it was minute by comparison with an actual volcano, however much more deadly. By the time they had reached the car storm-clouds were gathering over the blazing area.

Ten miles away—the car ran perfectly from the first, in proof that there was no longer a neutron-flood to ionize the air—ten miles away they saw rain falling upon smokily flaming hillsides. Lightning flashed among dark clouds. Water poured down. Not even a forest fire could survive such a downpour.

They went back to Brandon. It took them a day and night of steady driving, alternating at the wheel. Bud Gregory had little to say the whole way back. But when Murfree stopped the car before the repair shed and let him out Gregory grinned uncomfortably.

"What you goin' to do now?" He added apologetically: "I didn't mean to make nothin' like that. He made me mad an' then he used that dinkus like it wasn't meant to be used."

Murfree had left his wife and daughter in Brandon while he went back into the hills. Now he spoke tiredly.

"I'll pick up my family and go back to Washington. I'll report as much as they'll believe. Anyhow, when that rock cools off there'll be more radioactive stuff in it than is available in all the rest of the world together. Since your apparatus is cut off it won't act as a pile now, but it's plenty radioactive!"

Bud Gregory swallowed.

"I—uh—I lost time from work, goin' along with you," he said uneasily. "Y'oughta pay me day wages, anyhow. Huh? Say! You kinda liked that thing I fixed your car with. How'd you like to buy it?"

Murfree grimly got out his wallet. He counted what he had left. It was his expenses for getting back home.

"I've got just six hundred dollars," he said. "It's worth more, but I'll give you that for it."

"She's yours!" said Bud Gregory. All his uneasiness vanished. His eyes glistened. He

brought out the round cheesebox and put it in the back of Murfree's car.

"Anyhow," he said contentedly," I can always make another one when I got a mind to. So long."

Murfree drove off and got his wife and little girl. He left Bud Gregory looking speculatively at the eight automobiles awaiting the moment when he felt like working. . . .

Back in Washington Murfree made his report. At first they told him he was crazy. But seismographs did report a minor earthquake centered just where he'd said. A plane flew over and brought back photographs which proved the truth.

And then the Manhattan Project took over and built a splendid concrete road to the mass of highly if artificially radioactive rock and extracted large quantities of practically every known radioactive isotope from it. Everybody was happy.

But they wanted badly to talk to Bud Gregory—and they couldn't.

When FBI men went to urge him imperatively to come to Washington, he had disappeared. He had bought one of the eight cars in his repair shop for twenty-five dollars, repaired it by some magic of his own and gone off with his wife and children.

He was undoubtedly a motor-tramp, roaming the highways contentedly or sitting in magnificent somnolence, waiting until he felt like working or moving on. Incredible riches awaited him if he was ever found and consented to work.

Neither event seemed likely.

But Murfree was in the oddest situation of all. He couldn't be officially praised for what he did on leave. Nor could he be required to give up the gadget he bought from Bud Gregory. And that gadget was useless. It worked, but nobody understood it, and every attempt to duplicate it had failed. Duplicates simply didn't do anything. Murfee is still studying it.

But he did gain something, after all. His wife and small daughter are likely to keep on living and he was promoted a grade in the Civil Service. Now he gets forty-seven hundred a year.

When panic and widespread destruction threaten our cities, the Wizard of the Great Smokies invents a new gadget to protect America from atomic rockets—and uses it in an astounding and entertaining fashion—in

THE NAMELESS SOMETHING

Another Complete Bud Gregory Novelet Packed With Humor and Surprises

By WILLIAM FITZGERALD

Coming in Our Next Issue!

He was looking into incredible swirling blackness — and space and time and eternity

VICTORIOUS FAILURE

By BRYCE WALTON

Professor Klauson stood on the threshold of immortality, only to be driven back by strange, unfathomable forces!

WITH good reason, Professor H. Klauson hesitated; his wife's arms were holding him with a strangely insistent urgency and fear. He tried to disengage himself, but not with much enthusiasm. Although he had not admitted it to anyone but the Presidium's psycho-medic staff, he was afraid, too. Desperately and helplessly afraid.

"Howard, please." Her pale blue eyes were wide, staring into his with that intimacy only someone loved completely and without compromise ever sees. "Don't go back to the Laboratories, Howard. Don't ever go back again."

He smiled, unsuccessfully. He had never been able to hide anything from Lin.

"But, dear, this is ridiculous. We're scientists! We're not frightened by vague, intangible fears."

Her hands tightened on his shoulders. "We're scientists; so let us admit the obvious.

Something doesn't want you to ever complete your research, Howard. We've worked together for ten years, and now you're right on the verge of discovering the secret of life itself. And it means more to humanity than anything else in the history of mankind. But I'm afraid, Howard, and so are you. Whatever is against us stopped you before. Your mind almost broke. It will try again, and this time your mind may not recover."

He managed to push her from him, and immediately he felt lonelier, isolated. His faint laugh sounded foolishly insincere.

"Lin, for the love of science! You sound like a mystic. Any mind is liable to become unintegrated. You talk about invisible, intangible forces. These things can only be in men's minds, dear. No mentality is immune to disorientation."

She sobbed, her head swung back and forth hopelessly. A cloud of lovely hair glinted liquidly in the shifting light from the harmonics glowing from the transparent walls of their apartment. He couldn't leave her in this state.

"Lin, darling, listen to me. I can't abandon my life's work. Particularly something so profoundly important to humanity. One more projection, and my 'closed system' principle will be concluded. After that, think of it, Lin! This is really the one thing mankind has been seeking. All his other activities are only bypaths. With eternal life possible, mankind will have a real reason for struggling onward. Lin—"

"No, Howard," she was saying, brokenly. "There isn't an argument. To me, your mind is more important. Why did your mind black out just before you could finish your last experiment? Why. the whole magnificent psycho-medical staff at the Presidium couldn't find a reason. All the charts show you to be amazingly normal. There is something bigger than our science, Howard. It doesn't intend for you to ever finish your research."

"A woman's intuition?" he said sardonically.

"Not a woman's," she corrected. "Ours. Because you feel it the same as I do."

A SICK, vague fear came over him as he stood there nervously, remembering the gleaming, arched height of the biochemistry wards at World Science Presidium. That singularly awful instant just before he could finish his last experiment, when all his mental faculties had crumbled. The microfilm protector had just commenced whirring. Then that final spiraling downward into desperate gray fear and unconsciousness.

There had to be a logical explanation so that whatever blockage stood between him and the conclusion of his research could be torn down. The secret of the single cell had long been his. Whatever that three-dim microphoto film revealed, he and only he could turn the key to open the ultimate secret door into victorious eternity for all mankind. Now he blinked burning eyes. Lin was, of course, right. He felt it, too. A hidden, omnipresent kind of force that would prevent him from completing his research. But such a thought was adult infantilism, at best. A hidden force! In his world there had to be logical sequence of cause and effect. But even the psycho-medic staff hadn't been able to find one.

"Howard," she was saying, lips quivering. "Remember our Moon House?"

Klauson bristled, froze. "I remember. The World gave us a magnificent marble house on the Moon overlooking Schroeter's Canyon —a return favor for my many gifts to mankind. What a juvenile farce. Imagine me sitting up there on the Moon, with you—two futile little escapists, haunted by our own uselessness, and our fears. No, Lin. I've my particular destiny to fulfill. It isn't hiding away on the Moon. I'll never accept retirement on the Moon, or any place else. Either now, or after my research on the life force. I'd rather die than stop working in science."

He started for the exit panel. Her voice cut deeply, slowed him, turned him.

"You're going to the Laboratories again then," she asked faintly, "in spite of what happened before?"

He nodded, but when he tried to say yes, his throat was dry and sticky.

"Good-by, Howard," she said.

She was crying when he left. It made him feel terribly lost and guilty to leave her crying. But he had to. What made it so bad was that Lin had never cried before; she was so strong, emotionally. Without any real cause, this made him more nervous and irritable. But he was one of the world's greatest scientists. Everything must have a cause, somewhere. Sometime.

His gyrocar dropped down on the spacious roof-landing of the Biochemistry Building at the World Science Presidium. It was beginning to rain—solid, heavy, sharp-driving

drops that spattered on the dull, plastic mesh as he walked hurriedly across it to the ingress.

"Hello, Professor Klauson. This *is* a surprise. I didn't know you would be coming back so soon."

Klauson started violently, clutched at his heart. A sudden, shooting pain was there. Yet the staff had found nothing wrong with his mental or physical integration. They had checked and rechecked.

"Oh—it's you—Larry!" He paused, relieved. "You—you startled me, Larry. I didn't see anyone on the landing."

"I just came over to do a little work on my own," Larry explained.

He was a young, enthusiastic, highly capable student biochemist, with a shock of unruly black hair. He had graduated from World Tech seven years ago, and had been Klauson's assistant for five, working with him faithfully, sometimes during those grueling sixty-four hour stretches. He had been the only one with Klauson when he had lost consciousness.

"Didn't expect you back so soon, Professor," said Larry, talking casually as their elevator dropped them down below the subfloor level into the spacious, almost vaulted silence of Klauson's private laboratories. "Say, Professor, you intend to try to finish up again tonight?"

Klauson stiffened. He was here, he felt capable enough. It was only a matter of a few hours. Why not? Even as a therapeutic measure.

"I believe I will, Larry. I wasn't intending to, but now that you're here, too, I might as well."

Larry said nothing. He stood in the soft, yet full brilliance of the invisible flueros, his black, almost blue hair hanging over his eyes. He smiled. Klauson started, he had never quite responded this way to Larry's expression before. It seemed—peculiar, rather strange. He discarded that chain of thought and looked about his laboratory.

NOTHING had changed. Not that Klauson had expected things to be different. The microphoto film cabinets stood tier upon tier, a long stretch of recorded effort, a complete step-by-step, intricate process of creating life from that awesome moment when he had known the successful preparation of the first simple colloid and had started on his first organic synthesis.

Through the actual combination of the first molecules and the organic colloid and then the first tiny speck of synthesized protoplasm. The frenzied day and night battle against time. Time, that was the predominant factor in nature that did the trick. But he had compressed millions of years into twenty-five. From simple, organic compound through the simple colloid, the protein, the primitive protoplasm, the simplest unicellular organism, the flagellate and—then the great jump into the structure of the gene, the ferreting-out of that intricate, vital combination that gave man life and maintained it. He had conquered—almost.

The high, arched ceiling in the lab with its glowing columns and its streamlined equipment had been provided him by the entire earth—provided him by man's cooperative faith in himself. Men who would find so much greater an impetus to fight ahead if they only knew that whatever other success they might have, their ultimate end was inevitably life, instead of death.

But he would affirm a greater investment of their faith than their wildest dreams had ever granted him. No other man, or combination of men, in the world could synthesize all the knowledge in those cabinets and emerge with the final answer that he alone could evolve. No one but himself. Larry Verrill might possibly develop some capacity to work on the chain. But unlikely. High specialization had made it Klauson's responsibility alone.

Enthusiasm, eagerness was returning; the fear was gone.

"It's so simple, really, now that it's practically over," he said as he unzipped his aerogel cloak, and stepped toward the microphoto film projector. He was talking mostly to himself, a habit of his, only partly to Verrill.

"Yes," said Larry softly. "I suppose you might call it simple."

"Carrel saw to it that cells with which he experimented had a chance to achieve immortality. Under controlled conditions, the growth proceeds forever, logically. The body, a collection of cells, is a 'closed system.' Like a gyrocar, that's what we called it, didn't we, Larry? No closed system can endure unless it can inspect itself, oil itself, and keep itself in repair. A gyrocar can't do that, but the body can and does, though imperfectly."

Klauson warmed to his subject, and his

voice assumed a fresh vigor.

"We've conquered that imperfection! Yet I can hardly believe it myself. People can go on living without that final terrible, unconscious fear of death that must defeat them. One more projection, Larry. One remaining link for correlation. The answer is right here in this projector. An actual three-dimensional record of the very first spark in the heart of the cell itself, the primary bursting of a carbon atom commingling with a single cell, creating life. It's the first and the final record, Larry."

Larry nodded, but his lips were twisted in a rather sad, cynical smile, it seemed to Klauson.

"So simple, isn't it, Professor?"

"Yes, it really is," asserted Klauson, his enthusiasm blinding him to the peculiar reaction of Larry Verrill. "Whatever is revealed in this three-dim projection will contain the final step for the infinite prolongation of human life. When I synthesize it with Compton's H-9 film, we'll have it. Incredible, isn't it?"

"You may not realize just how incredible. How could you?" said Verrill. "Nor I either, for that matter."

Klauson hesitated, his hand frozen above the button that would throw the projector into life. Then, shrugging, his hand started to move down. But it didn't.

For then, unbelievably, terrifyingly, it happened a second time. Professor H. Klauson felt a blackness encompassing the mighty, vaulted laboratory. It closed in tightly, smothering, icy. It wrapped his entire swirling mind in darkness. . . .

A little round man smiled broadly at him from a stool close to his bed in the psycho-ward.

"Remember me, Professor?" His face beamed with self-possession.

"You're the clinic psychologist who handled the other electroencephal checkup," said Klauson quickly. "Or are you?"

"Good recall," commented the psychologist. "Name's Dunnel. I've rechecked your whole file since your—ah—second disorientation. Weak alphas of course; but that's necessary in your type. No disrhythmia. Tempo's exceptionally well balanced. Look, Professor Klauson, there is still no logical reason for your being here. But meanwhile, these charts don't fib. But I'm not so smug as to think we know so much about the old cortex. Still, logically, we can't find a reason."

"But there must be a—"

"Oh, we'll find out, Professor. How do you feel now? The harmonics working all right?"

"Not quite. Dunnel, both times I have been, well, terribly afraid *before the attacks*. Some kind of intuition. My wife noticed it, too."

"You're beginning to build delusions and rationalizations. We must guard against that. You're bound to put undue emphasis on it, make it far more complex and important than it really is, because it happened at such critical moments. You deal in absolutes, Professor. Cause must equal effect."

"But it wasn't coincidence either time," insisted Klauson. "Not logically. Coincidence is too simple, too handy a gadget, Dunnel. Isn't it?"

"Maybe," said Dunnel, lighting a cigarette. "Anyway, I won't burden you with a lot of hasty probing around. The Staff says you're O.K. to leave the clinic today. Come to my office tomorrow afternoon if you feel like it. If you don't, call me up and tell me why. See you tomorrow."

A little later after the Staff had given him another thorough going-over which revealed nothing amiss, he met his wife who was waiting for him with their gyrocar on the roof-landing.

ONLY a third of Klauson's normal life was gone, yet he looked twice his age except for rare moments like this. He kissed Lin almost boyishly as they stood together looking over the gleaming plastic structures piercing a clear, blue sky. A soft warm summer wind blew disarmingly over Washington.

Finally Klauson said abruptly: "I'm sorry, Lin. You were right. I'll admit the obvious. Something beyond the scope of our science is blocking my progress. But what is it?"

She shook her head, her eyes brooding with concern for him, deep, dark.

"I've talked with the Science Council," she finally said in a whisper. She turned with resolution to face him. "Howard, they have agreed with me. You need a very long vacation. Our Moon House is gathering Lunar dust, if there is any. I have the Council's support now. We're going to the Moon and we're not going to think about anything that even suggests biochemistry."

"There isn't any such a thing, not on this world," said Klauson.

"Howard. We're going to raise extra-terrestrial flowers."

Klauson stared, and was suddenly and violently angry.

"Flowers! You're mad!"

"But the Council's on my side, Howard. They're going to"—she paused, lips trembling—"going to accept your resignation from the Presidium."

A sick hate flooded his stomach, burst in his brain. He was stunned, impotent. He quivered silently. It was their own staff that had said there was nothing wrong with him! Yet, they were demanding that he resign! Rest on that escapist's bromide, Luna. Retreat from reality; rot in meaningless isolation.

"I'll not do it, Lin," he announced harshly. "I refuse to drop a conclusion that might mean the final step in human evolution."

He was dazed, ill, as she led him silently into the gyrocar and piloted it to their apartment. No use arguing with Lin about it. She had that ageless woman's selfish love to protect her own kind. She and the Council had combined to work against him, instead of helping him solve the cursed enigma.

As soon as they reached home, Klauson contacted the Council President, Gaudet, on the teleaudio. He argued the case, objected fiercely, begged. Gaudet was kind, logical.

"We're all so sorry, Klauson," his huge head said. "But it is quite obvious that you absolutely need a lengthy period of relaxation. Although our own staff can find no logical basis for this decision, we undoubtedly shall, and soon.

"You worked almost steadily for ten years. It is very possible that some highly specialized cellular blockage has developed that even our probers have failed to detect. A few years, raising flowers as Mrs. Klauson has suggested, something completely dissociated from your present work, is probably the answer. Then you can return to your laboratories. Meanwhile, your assistant, Larry Verrill, can continue with your research, perhaps?"

"Verrill is an excellent assistant," Klauson said, controlling himself with difficulty. "But he can never finish my work. I operate, many times, empirically; you know that. My brain alone holds the key to correlate most of the basic links of the chain."

But no amount of discussion could persuade Gaudet. It had all been definitely decided by the Council and Lin. He would retire to the Moon House by Schroeter's Canyon and raise fantastic flowers in the Moon's unique environmental conditions. He would vegetate and rot with the flowers!

"Raising flowers!" Klauson sagged, groaned helplessly, desperately.

The next afternoon in Dunnel's office with its psycho-harmonics shifting benevolently from the opaque walls, Dunnel was saying: "Fear of failure, that's one possibility; unlikely though. Doesn't check with your psycho-charts."

"There is no doubt," Klauson said. "I'm just as certain about this conclusive step as I've been about every one I've taken since I began."

"But you don't know," Dunnel pointed out, "until you've concluded and some illusive censor prevents that. Wait! Here's another possibility: maybe you're afraid of the consequences of giving humanity the ability to live forever! Think of what it would mean. Think of it consciously! I can't. It's too big. Every basic pattern completely altered. Psychology and the social sciences, particularly, would no longer apply. Humanity would become something unhuman by all present standards of evaluation. It's really an alien concept, Professor. Subconsciously, you're afraid of what it would mean!"

"I see your reasoning there, Dunnel. Frankly, I've never considered that at all. I've been so wrapped up in the thing itself."

"But let's assume that your subconscious has been working on it," insisted Dunnel. "I tell you, Professor; you go back to that laboratory of yours, right now. Get in there with all the fatal paraphernalia and just introspect for a while. Think of the whole, and go beyond the limits of your specialized course. There are so many possible consequences to a sudden transition from mortality to immortality. Think about the things that can, and will, happen. Seems to me, that might well be the motivation for the fear. And, Professor, come back and see me tomorrow."

KLAUSON was like the pilots who get rocket psychosis on their first Luna run, and who must immediately make another flight or lose their resistance to space-fear forever. He must go back to the laboratory. Try again.

And Dunnel's diagnosis about Klauson's possible fear of the consequences of giving humanity sudden immortality—he definitely had something there. Klauson wondered why he had never thought of it before. Like Dun-

nel had said, it would change every present standard of humanity. The enormity of the possible repercussion!

Klauson trembled a little with triumph. Yes, that could be the basis for the fear. A scientist must weigh the consequences of his discoveries. Would the secret of eternal life be a boon, or a catastrophe for man?

Klauson entered a public teleaudio booth and got Verrill's apartment in east Washington. Verrill's eyes seemed to have changed —they looked like those of someone else. Ridiculous. Yes, he did need a rest.

"Verrill," he said tightly, "I'm going back to the laboratory again, right now. I want you there, too."

Verrill's eyes widened, then narrowed. His mouth slipped into that sad, cynical grin.

"If you insist, Professor. And you always would, of course."

"Why—er—naturally, I will," said Klauson. "Meet me there in fifteen minutes."

The teleaudio faded, but Klauson sat there a moment. He brushed at his face wearily. So strange, the way Verrill had talked—like a stranger almost. But fifteen minutes later the vaulted height of the gleaming laboratory was very silent, and seemed, somehow, cold, as Klauson saw Verrill walking toward him. Verrill seemed to blot out the laboratory, loom extraordinarily large before him.

Klauson had unconsciously been backing away. He felt the hard cold light of the supporting column against the small of his back. He was looking, fearfully, into Larry Verrill's eyes.

Into his eyes! Into incredible, swirling blackness. Into space and time and—eternity.

And Professor H. Klauson—*knew.*

"Varro," said the thin, wavering body. "It is time for your little transmigration. The Switcher is ready. Don't think too much about what you must do. We are four-dimensional but we are still not very well adapted to the complications of the coordinate stream."

Klauson knew, yet it was far beyond his capacity to understand. He was seeing something that had happened, yet was still to happen. Fourth dimensionally, time, as he knew it, was meaningless. The man who had spoken in this strange world revealed by Verrill's alien brain, was named Grosko. The other figure, Varro, was also Verrill. Klauson knew that, but he understood very little.

Grosko's boneless fingers were manipulating the matrix coordinate console.

"I've never been convinced," muttered Varro. "It is an incomprehensible cycle, even to our fourth-dimensional minds. Where can there ever be any logical end?"

"You have already taken on some of your three-dimensional characteristics—those of Verrill, whose body you will assume control of, and merge your mentality with. Already you are beginning to think in terms of absolutes, in terms of three-dimensional logic. Forget a hypothetical end, which our fourth-dimensional consciousness knows cannot exist. You will encounter no difficulties. You will gradually adjust yourself to *their* concepts of the absolute; but still you will retain enough of your Varro mentality to carry out your assignment."

"But it seems so unprogressive in the Universal sense," persisted Varro. "Everything seems only a big, futile circle."

"But not for us; that is your three-dimensional absolutism creeping in already though you have not even begun merging with Verrill yet. You are beginning to make premature psychological adjustments. There are countless tangents of probability. And in the particular one that has evolved us, Professor Klauson must be prevented from completing his research. If he does, we will not evolve. But of course we have evolved, so it is inevitable that you will carry out your assignment successfully. Inevitable."

"No free agency, even in the eternal sense," mused Varro. "Everything in all dimensions of space-time is interdependent. We are aware of it, because of our fourth-dimensional minds, but those of Klauson's stage of development are not."

"That is correct," said Grosko. "They realize that everything that has happened is determined by a complex array of circumstantial causes, but they see this only in immediate, comprehensible perspective. The same is true in the Universal also, and in the time-anlim, which their three-dimensional consciousness cannot comprehend.

"Cause and effect, fourth-dimensionally, works also in what they would consider, reversal. What they see as an effect, is also cause. They tie in past, future, present, with cause and effect. Really there is no association. An effect can be in what they consider their past; and a cause can exist in their future. But you will understand after you assume possession of Verrill's consciousness."

"I hope so. It certainly seems terribly in-

volved to me right now."

"That is a natural reaction of Verrill's mind which you are already beginning to associate yourself with. Well, Varro, you are ready for the complete alteration?"

"Naturally," said Varro. "It is on the chronosophic charts, isn't it?"

"Good-by, then," said Grosko. "Don't use the Power unless you find it absolutely necessary, then only mildly of course—"

Varro was enveloped in the radiations of the matrix. His consciousness molecules leaked slowly into the unsuspecting and narrow confines of Larry Verrill's three-dimensional consciousness as he graduated from World Tech in 2081, two years before he was to become the laboratory assistant of Professor H. Klauson.

"You—you're Varro?" Klauson managed in a hoarse whisper.

Larry Verrill nodded. A curtain had dropped over Verrill's eyes behind which those incredible, incomprehensible vistas had opened for a brief interim.

KLAUSON staggered. There was no basic comprehension. No two-dimensional being could imagine such a thing as *UP*. What he termed past, present, future, to a fourth-dimensional concept would be regarded in the same way as if he, Klauson, were floating a mile in the air regarding the activities of a two-dimensional plane-man. Their only temporal sense would involve simply horizontal movement. And his three-dimensional concepts couldn't ever conceive of those of Varro's. For Varro, there was no past, present, future, as Klauson saw them.

Varro and Grosko and their world was really a future stage of man to Klauson. But Klauson and his world of 2089 was not really the past to Varro. It was only a part of the time-anlim, a term which was meaningless to Klauson. It referred to the oneness of space-time which was clearly envisioned in their fourth-dimensional minds.

"You're not—human," Klauson finally managed to say.

It sounded strange, and somewhat absurd to him after he said it.

"No," agreed Verrill or Varro. "And I might say to you, 'you're not an ape.' You think of past and future as somehow, separate. I can only tell you that it is all a kind of oneness, which we call the time-anlim. You realize now that my being here is inevitable. It isn't a matter of probability. It was never intended that you should finish this experiment, so that the present stage of humanity might live forever, forever, itself, as a word, being meaningless abstraction."

"But how can someone from the future come back through time to influence the present so that they will—"

Verrill interrupted impatiently.

"That has already been partially explained. Your three-dimensional brain can never understand it fully. Sufficient to say, Professor Klauson, that immortality, by its very nature, is impossible."

Klauson sagged despondently, futilely. He was sitting on a stool looking up. There was no impulse to escape, or to attempt to avoid what was too obviously his end.

"Why?" he asked, listlessly. "Why is immortality impossible?"

"Put it this way, Professor." Klauson winced; the voice sounded so like the harmless, youthful and rather naive Larry Verrill. "Immortality means the cessation of man's association with the process of entropy. Your developing makes another integral part of the entropic process possible. You call it evolution."

He paused, then continued. "You regard us as human. You have other labels, mutants, homo-superiors, or even supermen. But we only develop in this process called by you, evolution. Can't you see the paradox of immortality? It would be feasible if immortality was some part of the evolving process, but it isn't. It might be in some other line of probability, but not this particular one. Look into what you call the past, Professor."

Verrill's eyes were narrow, inscrutable.

"If the ape had suddenly developed immortality, you wouldn't have evolved. Thinking man could never have evolved from an immortal and therefore stagnant race of apes. Just as mortal man came from apes, so homo-superior evolves from mortal man. Paradoxically, there can be no immortality, if the true racial chain is to survive."

Klauson sat stiffly. Well, Dunnel had gotten close to the correct solution though he could never dream of the truth. There had been a deeply buried subconscious fear of the results of immortality. It would have destroyed the—well, what he called 'man's future.' But there was one thing that might be explained.

"Why have you allowed me to advance as far as I have in my research?"

Verrill smiled sadly. "Your whole concept is based on false logic," he said. "But I can't explain. There isn't a question of *allowing* you. You see, you had to develop this far with your experimentation. Your work involving cosmic ray treatment of genes resulted in certain germ plasm alteration in certain individuals. This will bring about our fourth-dimensional emergence in what you call 'later,' as mutants."

"Then," said Klauson faintly, "I'm also responsible for you."

The young man nodded. "You would term it that. But it's all an integral whole. You deal in cause and effect. But the closest you can get to our logic is to hyphenate it endlessly, cause-effect-cause-effect-cause-effect-cause-effect-cause-effect-cause-effect, without end."

There was a heavy silence. Then Verrill said, not unkindly, "I had better take care of you now, Professor. Your mind will have to bear far too much strain. Your reasoning processes will demand an explanation, which for your three-dim consciousness, is impossible. You will develop a psychosis unless I alter your mind sufficiently."

"What are you going to do?" whispered Klauson, his mouth dry.

"By suggestion, I'll alter your basic behavior and motivation patterns. You will retain most of your present mental characteristics. Amnesia followed by new and fundamentally different lines of activity."

Klauson started to run away, but he found himself sucked into a whirling maelstrom of senseless, unrelated chaos. He reeled dizzily. He felt himself falling. . . .

HE SAW his laboratory assistant, Larry Verrill, standing above him, saying with nervous concern, "Professor, you've fainted again. You all right now?"

Klauson felt a queer shocking sensation, an intangible impulse, rather painful.

"No, Larry," he replied. "It's over with me now. I really don't think I could have succeeded in achieving immortality for mankind anyway. There's a flaw in the chain of development, somewhere. And the whole procedure is so complex we could never go over it and find the error. Goodnight, Larry. I'm going home."

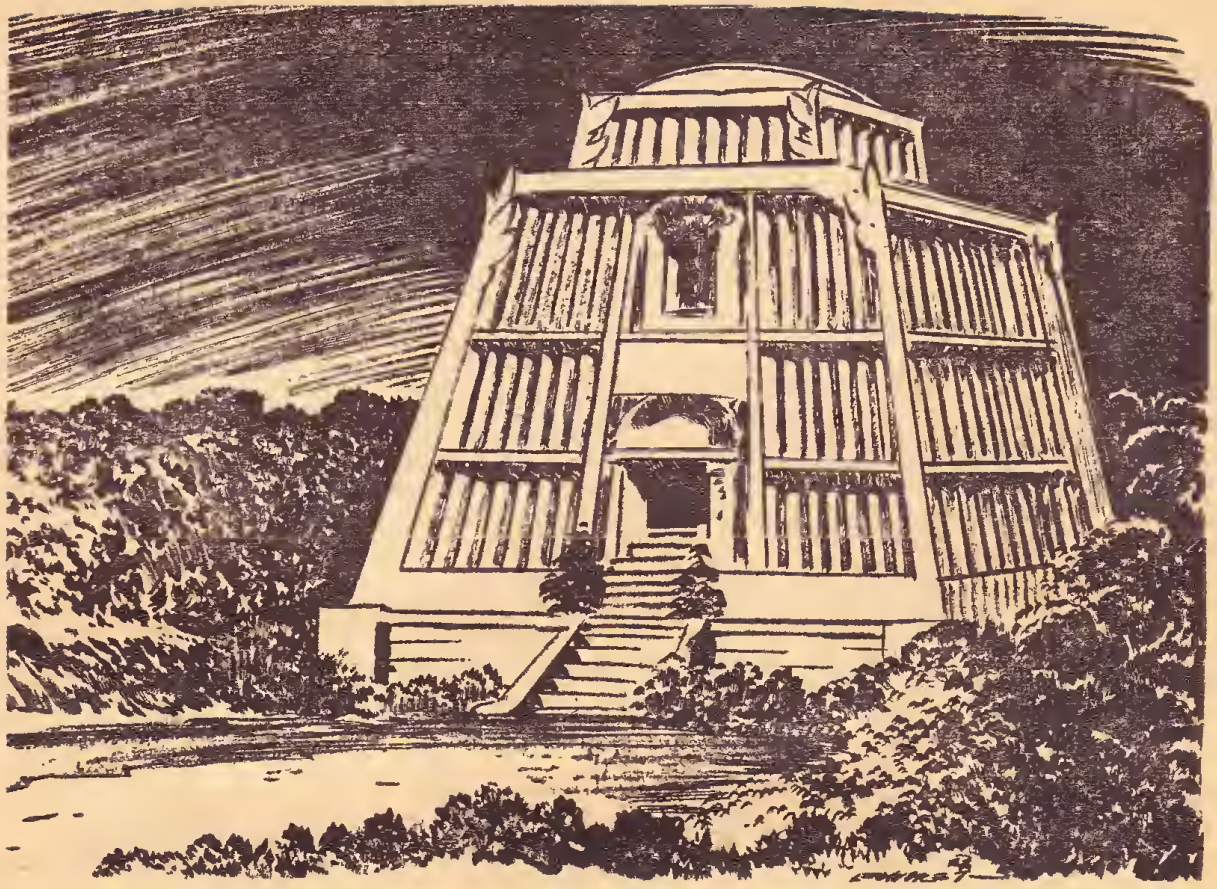
He didn't wait for his gyrocar to reach his apartment to tell Lin the startling developments. He contacted her by teleaudio.

"I've changed my mind, Lin dear. I've decided to accept your and the Council's advice. Get together everything we'll want to take to Moon House with us. And, by the way, get all the microfilm you can find on botany and extraterrestrial horticulture. I wonder what has been the matter with me all my life?"

Her face shone with a lovely pink flush of happiness as it faded from the small screen.

Klauson relaxed as the gyrocar sped toward his apartment. His eyes closed, his day-dream was one of glorious technicolor, overflowing with mental reproductions of the magnificent flowers he and Lin would grow in the quiet comfort of the Lunarian valleys.

Weston tracked halfway around the jungle-laden planet to land in a clearing beside a huge, white-marble building



QUEST TO CENTAURUS

By GEORGE O. SMITH

Given the joke assignment of tracking down a Kilroy of the post-interplanetary-war era, Captain Alfred Weston discovers the fate of the solar system is in his hands!

CHAPTER I

Soft Assignment

CAPTAIN ALFRED WESTON entered the room and nodded curtly to the men at the conference table. Doctor Edwards, holding forth at the head of the table, nodded as though he had not seen the over-polite greeting. He waved the newcomer to an empty seat on the opposite side of the table, and Weston went around to sit down.

Edwards had been talking on some other subject, obviously, but now he dropped it. "Captain Weston," he said, "you are still classified as convalescent."

"Rank foolishness," grumbled Weston.

"Unfortunately," smiled Edwards, "it is the Medical Corps that makes the decision. A bit of rest does no man any harm. But, Weston, despite the convalescent classification, we have a job that seems to be right up your alley. Want it?"

"You're asking?" said Weston quizzically. "This is no order?"

A NOVELET OF THE SPACEWAYS

"As an official convalescent, we cannot order you to duty."

Weston scowled. "I see no choice," he said. His tone was surly, his whole attitude inimical.

"Nevertheless, the choice is your own," said Edwards. As psychiatrist for the Medical Corps, Edwards was treading on thin ground. But he knew he must force this disagreement into the open and blast it out of Weston's mind.

It was a common enough block, but it needed elimination.

"Certainly the choice is mine," said Weston bitterly. "Hobson's Choice. Either I take the job and do it, or I refuse to take it and gain the disrespect of the entire Corps. I see no choice and therefore I will take your job—sight unseen!"

"We shall offer the job," said Edwards flatly. "After which you will make your decision."

"Very well," answered Weston sullenly.

Edwards ignored the tone of the answer. "Weston, you are a ranking officer. This job requires a ranking officer because it demands someone whose authority to investigate will not be questioned, scoffed at or ignored. You are now a Captain. We intend to raise your rank to Senior Captain—which is due you and has been withheld only until your convalescence is complete.

"We shall offer you a roving order and a four-mark commissioned directive which will give you authority to requisition whatever items you may need to complete your project. Experimental Spacecraft Number XXII will be assigned to you."

"You make it very attractive. Shall I now quote the ancient one about 'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts'?"

"There is no need for insolence, Weston. You are in excellent position to do us a service. If you accept it will not be necessary to create a hole in the Corps by removing some other ranking officer from his command. This job will also give you the swing of space once again. You've been out of space now for about a year—"

"Ever since the First Directive attack," said Weston bitterly.

"Right. But look, Weston. Regardless of what opinion the world may have, we in this room have reason to believe that there is something hidden behind the Jordan Green legend. We want you to get to the bottom of it. Will you do this?"

WESTON grunted. He looked across the room to the door beside the blank wall beside the doorframe. On the space above the chair-rail were the scrawled words *Jordan Green was here!*

They were written in space-chart chalk, which Weston understood to be the case with the uncounted thousands of such scrawlings sprinkled all over the Solar System. It looked like a hurried scrawl at first glance, yet it could not have been written by a man in a tearing hurry because it was so very legible.

Weston himself had seen over a thousand of such scrawls in out-of-the-way places and he had joined in the hours of discussion that went on through the Space Corps as to who Jordan Green might be, and if there were really such a character.

Jordan Green, it seemed, was one of those legendary people that are never seen. He had been everywhere and had apparently been there first. It was a common joke that, if the Space Corps started to erect a lonely outpost on some secret asteroid on Monday, Tuesday morning would find Jordan Green's familiar scrawl beside the door on the unfinished wall.

The trouble was that Weston himself had written one or two of these messages. And though he suspected that every officer in the Corps had been guilty of perpetuating the gag at some time or other, not one of them ever admitted it. It was a sort of unmentioned, no-prize contest in the Corps just something to talk about in the long lonely times between missions.

Every officer clamored for missions to the out of the way places because he hoped to have a Jordan Green yarn to spin and the legendary traveller was always reported. Weston smiled at one incident he had heard of.

An officer he knew had found a place where there was no scrawl and had written, *I beat Jordan Green to this spot!* The following day there was written beneath it, *So what? Have you looked under the wallpaper? Jordan Green.* The officer had torn away the wallpaper and, below it on the bare plaster, was the original scrawl.

The officer was still living down the joke

None the less Weston thought it a waste of time to send a ranking officer on such a wild-goose chase.

He said so. And he went on to recount the facts of the case as he knew them. How,

he wanted to know, was he to proceed when he was almost certain that every man in the Space Corps was guilty?

Edwards listened to Weston's objections. He agreed, partially.

"It is admitted that the officers may have amused themselves by writing it themselves. But when you consider the man-hours and the kilowatts wasted in space-chatter the Martian War could have been finished in three months less time.

"The problem is just this, Weston. Did it start as a joke—perhaps like the boy who carves his initials the highest in the Old Oak Tree—or was some agency hoping to cause enough waste to slow up our prosecution of the late war?"

"I believe that it was started by some courier," said Weston flatly. "Then it caught on and pyramided far beyond Jordan Green's expectations. Have you sought the man himself?"

"We've established that any Jordan Greens in the service were not responsible," said Edwards. "However, this possible courier of yours probably would take a pseudonym lest fooling around with official time and energy get him a reprimand. We want you to track down the origin of Jordan Green! Will you do it?"

Weston shrugged. "I have no choice."

Edwards turned to the man beside him. "Commodore Atkins, will you provide Senior Captain Weston with the necessary credentials, papers, orders and insignia?"

Atkins smiled. "Come to my office, Weston. We'll have you fixed up in a hurry."

WESTON rose and followed the commodore out of the room. Then Edwards turned to the other doctor in the conference room and took a deep breath before he said: "Well, that much is accomplished!"

"You're the psychiatrist," said the other. "I'm just a simple surgeon. For the life of me, I can't see it. What happens when Weston discovers that this is just a peg-whittling job handed out to a good man who is going stale for lack of something to do?"

"Reconsider his case from the psychiatric angle," said Edwards. "Weston was an excellent officer. Because of his record he was one of twenty men selected to carry the first projectors of Directive Power against Mars. He was proud of being included in the Directive Power attack.

"His position in the task force was one that gave him the highest statistical chance for success—yet with the usual trick of fate, Weston was the first and only man whose ship was shot to pieces in the countermeasure defense. He never even warmed up the secondary feeds to the Directive Power system before he was hit.

"The rescue squadron picked him up in bad shape. He was maintained in artificial unconsciousness while you put him together again—but by that time the Martians had surrendered and the war was over. Weston feels that he missed his big chance to go down in history. It's a plain case of frustration and self-guilt."

"But how can sending him on this wild-goose chase do any good?"

"The cure for frustration is to let the subject either do that which he has been barred from doing, or to give him something as pleasing to do to divert his attention. The way to cure the type of self-guilt that Weston has—an inner feeling of failure—is to give him something in which he can succeed."

"But—"

"However, we cannot start another war. Aside from our natural reluctance, we'd have first to develop the application of Directive Power to the space drive, which will give us interstellar flight, and we'd have to go out in the galaxy with a chip on our shoulder to seek such a war.

"Then Weston might be able to obtain release. He is like the chap whose classmate turns up a Space Admiral while he himself is mustered out of service because of Venusite malaria.

"However niggling this job may be, by the time that Weston is cured through the work he'll be doing he will note that all of his former friends are envious of the very lush job he has.

"All space-hopping, no fixed base, a roving commission at four-mark level, an experimental spacecraft and, because he is chasing a will of the wisp that may be either malignant or downright foolish, no one will question his actions, castigate him if he fails or scorn his job.

"Remember this, Tomlinson, any man who goes out to unwind a wildly-tangled legend to its core has a real job on his hands. There must be reams and reams of conflicting evidence that will itself cover up our little work-therapy until he gets interested

in some outlandish phase of it and settles down to work. Once he readjusts he won't mind a bit. Right now, however, Weston is mingled anger and gratification."

"Why?"

"He is happy because of the commission and the increase in rank and the freedom of action. He is angry, Tomlinson, because he knows that we have confidence in him. His self-pity is blasted because we still think he is a good bet.

"To continue in his present mental state requires that he continue to believe himself battered by fate. In other words, to enjoy his frustration-complex Weston must continue to be frustrated."

"Golly!" breathed Tomlinson. "Even when a man is slightly nuts he likes himself that way!"

"Correct," laughed Edwards. "That's one of the things that makes psychiatry difficult. It also makes Weston hate any condition which forces him to change. Now, to space with Al Weston. I'm hungry. How about you?"

Tomlinson grinned, nodded and beat Doctor Edwards to the door.

CHAPTER II

No Coddling, Please

SENIOR CAPTAIN ALFRED WESTON sat in his experimental spacecraft and wondered about it all. He had a swamped, shut-in feeling that was growing worse as the hours went by. He knew that he would never have another chance as good as his first chance with the Directive Power attack. In that he had failed.

This job was a fool project at best. Weston had come down from one of twenty selected men to a high-priced office boy's position. Not that he objected to regaining his position in the eyes of the world via some honest project—but if they persisted in bringing him back along the long hard road, it would be so very long and so very hard.

After all, he was no ensign, to rise through the ranks gaining experience. Yet that is what he was going to do—again. There had to be some project worthy of his ability!

There was conflict in his mind. One very small portion of his brain kept telling him that they did not hand out four-mark commissions, increases in rank and roving orders to ensigns, even ensigns in fact with captain's ratings.

He scoffed at that, but was forced to recognize it anyway. In a fit of sarcasm he went to the wall beside the spacelock, grabbed a piece of space-chart chalk and scrawled, *Jordan Green was here, too!* on the wall.

Then he threw the chalk out the spacelock door in a fit of temper.

The whole assignment was far beneath his dignity. An officer of his rank should have a large command, not a small speedster—even one of the desirable experimental models. He felt like a President of the Interplanetary Communications Network, forced to replace worn patch-cords in a telephone exchange, or a President of Terra, forced to write official letters to a number of third-class civil service employees.

He, Alfred Weston, was being forced to forego his command in order to snoop around trying to locate the originator of one of the craziest space-gags in history.

Well, so it was beneath his notice—he could treat it with proper disdain. No doubt the President of ICN might enjoy replacing worn out patch-cords just to keep his hand in. He could do the same. He could make whatever stupid moves were necessary, make them with an air of superiority that made it obvious he was not extending himself, He might appear to even be doing it for the laughs.

Laughs! he thought. People will think that's all I'm to be trusted with!

He shrugged. He was on a roving commission, and therefore there was no one to watch his progress. He'd put others to work and loaf.

He snapped the communicator, dialed the Department for official orders, gave his rank and commission, issued a blanket order directed at the commanders at all Terran Posts.

"Compile a cross-indexed list of all Jordan Green markings in your command-posts. The listings must be complete on the following factors: text, writing material, handwriting index and approximate location."

This, he knew, would take time. Perhaps he would be forced to follow up the original order with a more firm request. Weston expected no results immediately.

But the mass of data that came pouring in staggered him. It mounted high, it was complex and uncorrelated. Weston's natural dislike of the project made him lax in his work. He went at it in desultory fashion, which resulted in his getting far behind any schedule. The work continued to pile up and ultimately snowed him under.

He began to hate the sight of his desk as the days went by and avoided it diligently. It was groaning under the pile of paperwork. Instead of using his ability and freedom to dig into the job, Weston used his commission and his rank to enter places formerly forbidden to him.

On the pretense of seeking Jordan Green information, he entered the ultra-secret space laboratory on Luna and watched work on highly restricted technical developments. He was especially interested in the work of adapting Directive Power to the space drive and, because they knew him and of him, the scientists were quite free with information that might have been withheld from any visitor of rank lower than Senior Captain.

THIS he enjoyed. It was a privilege given to all officers of senior rank, a type of compensation, a relaxation. That he accepted the offer without doing his job was unimportant to Weston. He felt that they owed it to him.

By the time he returned from Luna, he had more data that he merely tossed on the pile—and it was immediately covered by another pile of data that had come in during his absence and was awaiting his return. He decided he was too far behind ever to catch up, and so he loafed in the scanning room, looking at the pile of work with a disconnected view as though it were not his.

His loafing was not affected by the streams of favorable publicity he received. His picture was used occasionally; he was mentioned frequently in commendation. It was well-known that the only casualty from the First Directive Attack was working through his convalescence on the very complex job of uncovering the source of the Jordan Green legend.

But Weston knew just how important his job really was, and he ignored both it and the glowing reports of the newspapers.

Eventually friends caught up with him and demanded that he come along on a party. He tried to wriggle out of it, but they insisted. Their intention of making him enjoy himself was obvious. He viewed them with a certain amount of scorn, though he said nothing about it.

If it gave them pleasure to try to lift him out of his slough of despond he'd not stop them, but he could avoid them and their silly prattlings. They would not be denied, however, so Al Weston went, reluctantly.

Obviously for his benefit, someone had scrawled *Jordan Green was here!* on the side of the wall in Jeanne Tarbell's home, and as he entered the whole gang was discussing it. They turned to him for an official opinion.

"Most of them were made the way this one was," he said scornfully.

Tony Larkin laughed. He turned to Jeanne.

"You see," he said, "a lot of us had much to do with winning the war. I've—found several—myself."

"Scrawled several," corrected Weston sourly.

"Don't be bitter," said Larkin. "Even though you now outrank me, you shouldn't change from boyish prank to official pomp overnight."

"Maybe you'd like to have as silly a job hung on you," snapped Weston.

"If the commish and the roving order and all went with it—I'd take to it like a duck to water."

"Is that all you're good for?" asked Weston scornfully.

"Look, Al, I'm a plain captain in this man's Space Corps," returned Larkin. "Anytime I want to sweep up the floor in my office I'll do it, see? One—no one can do it better, and two—no one can say that sweeping floors is my top position in life.

"It isn't a loss of dignity to exhibit your skill in ditch-digging or muck-raking. It makes you more human when people know that, despite your gold braid, you aren't afraid to get your hands as dirty as theirs. At least they didn't plant you in the front office because you'd make a mess of working in the machine shop."

"You'd not like to be ordered to a dirty job," snapped Weston.

"If it had to be done and I was told to do it, I'd do it and do it quick. You can take a bath afterwards and wash off the dirt—and be the gainer for knowing how the Other Half lives!"

Weston turned and walked out. Larkin frowned sorrowfully and apologized to Jeanne and the rest. Tom Brandt shrugged.

"We all agree, Tony," he said. "But drumming at him will do no good. He'll have to find himself on his own time."

JEANNE nodded and went out after Weston.

"Al," she said, pleading, "come back and be the man we used to know."

"I can't," he said. He was utterly dejected.

"But you can. It's in you. Apply yourself. So this is a poor job in your estimation. If it is beneath your ability you should be able to do it with one hand."

"You too?" he said bitterly. "I thought you'd see things my way."

"I do, honestly. But, Al, I can't turn back the clock. I can't give you another chance at the Directive thing. You did not fail. No one thinks you did or they'd not trust you with a high rank and a free commission. You were the victim of sheer chance and none of it was your fault."

"But why did it happen to me?" he cried bitterly. "Why couldn't I have been successful?"

"Someone was bound to get it," she said simply. "You prefer your own skin to someone else's?"

"Wouldn't you—if the chips were down?"

She nodded. "Certainly. But I don't think I'd hate everybody that was successful if I were the unlucky one."

"Then they top it off by giving me this stupid job."

"Maybe you think that unraveling a legend is child's play. Well, Alfred Weston, satisfying the demands or the interest of a few billion people as to the truth of Jordan Green is no small item!

"He who satisfies the public interest is far more admired than a captain of industry or a ruler of people. And if this job is a boy's work why did they send a man to do it, complete with increase in rank and a roving commission?"

"Because Jordan Green was of no importance until they needed a simple job to use in coddling a man they consider a simpleton!" growled Weston.

"And you are the man they selected to join with the Directive Power attack," she said, stepping back and inspecting him carefully. "Well, suppose you complete this simple job first. Then let's see whether you can accomplish something you consider worthy of your stature."

"You're insulting," he said shortly.

"You wouldn't be able to recognize an insult," she said scornfully. She turned and left the place with tears in her eyes. Tony Larkin intercepted her and dried her eyes.

"It's tough," he told her. "But until he shakes the feeling that Fate is against him he'll be poor company. Eventually everybody will dislike him and then he'll have nothing to do but to go ahead and work.

"Whatever initial success comes will break his interest in himself. He'll go at it in desperation, in hatred perhaps, but he'll emerge with a sense of humor again. Until then, Jeanne, you'll have to sit and suffer with the rest of us."

"But was that Jordan Green job wise?"

"I can think of a thousand officers who would tackle it with shouts of glee," he said. "Lady, what a lark! I'd be giving cryptic statements to the press and having a daisy of a time all over the Solar System.

"Weston is one of us. When he regains his perspective he'll view it the same way—as a lark! Right now, though," he said seriously, "it's best that he stay out of the public eye. I'd hate to have the Space Corps judged by his standards."

"I guess we all feel sorry for him," she said.

"Yeah, but it's sorrow for his mental state and not for the cause. Now forget him and enjoy yourself."

CHAPTER III

The Cold Trail

WESTON strode from the party in an angry frame of mind that left him only as he entered his own ship. His anger simmered down to resentment and a bulldog determination to show them all. So they had sent a man to do a boy's work! Well, he would apply himself and ship them the answer complete down to the last decimal place!

If he had to catalogue every Jordan Green mark as to place and location in a long list and show proof of just which joking officer had scrawled it there, by heaven he'd do it. And if it made every man in the Corps a joker, that was too bad. But he would dig out the writer of each and every scrawl in

the Solar System if it took the rest of his life.

He faced the piles of data and set to work with determination born of burning resentment. Morning came, and he was still sorting, filing, deciding. The card-sorter clicked regularly, dropping the tiny cards into piles that were cross-indexed and tabulated on a master card. Reports in lengthy form, mere cards of terse data, incomplete reports—all of them he went after and scanned carefully to make some sort of mad pattern if he could.

He found himself weak from lack of sleep and fought it off with hot coffee and benzedrine until he had succeeded in unraveling the now-dusty pile of data. It was full of erroneous information and false data. If Jordan Green existed he was well-covered by the scrawlings of men who wanted to perpetuate the joke. But, finished, he sat back in amazement.

Of thirty thousand such scrawlings, twenty-seven thousand were written in the same manner!

Top it—they were written with the same chalk!

Top that—they were unmistakably in the same handwriting!

"Now where in hades did any one man get so much time?" Al Weston asked himself.

He pored over a globe of Terra, stuck pins in it to show the location, then studied it to see if any pattern could be made of the grand scramble. There was apparently none, so he took a Mercator and did the same, standing off in a dim light to see if the pin-points caused any 'lining' of the vision into some recognizable pattern.

He got a chart of Mars and studied it. He tried to make the spatter-pattern of Mars line up to agree with the pin-pattern of Terra. He turned it this way and that to see. He photographed both and laid them on top of one another, and finally gave up. There was no significance.

He went to bed and, the next morning, dropped his ship at Marsport.

"I've a four-mark commission," he said sharply to the office aide at Marsquarters.

"I'll request an audience for you," said the office aide. He should, by all rights, be slightly cowed by the senior captain's rank and the free commission, but he was aide to the High Brass of conquered Mars and larger brass than this had come and gone—unsatisfied.

"See here, I'm on a roving commission and I want aid."

"Yes sir, I'll request you an audience—"

"Blast!" snarled Weston angrily. "I'm not fooling."

"No one fools here," returned the aide.

"Are you being insolent?"

"Not if I can avoid it, sir. But you understand that I am responsible only to Admiral Callahan. I am doing his bidding and those are his wishes."

"You've not spoken to him about them."

"I need not—which is why I'm his aide. You see, sir, I'm not trying to tell you your business, but there is a lot of important work going on here."

"Will you contact him?"

"No, sir."

"I order you."

"I'd think twice, sir. I am not being personally obstinate nor am I ignorant of your rank, Senior Captain Weston. But I know Admiral Callahan's temperament."

"My order stands," said Weston, "I will be received."

"Yes sir. I'm sorry, sir." The aide turned and entered the office. He emerged, shortly afterwards and motioned for Al to enter. Weston cast a down-his-nose glance at the aide, then shut the door behind him. Against the wall beside the door was a scrawled legend.

"Jordan Green has been here, too!"

THE style was unmistakable—as unmistakable as the wrath that greeted him.

"Explain, Senior Captain Weston!"

"I am on a roving commission, rank four-mark. I—"

"I'm aware of your rank, your mission and your commission. Come to the point. I want to know why you think you are more important than anybody else!"

"I—have not that opinion, sir."

"You must have it, or you'd not have behaved as you did! Come on, speak."

"Well, sir, I've uncovered a rather startling bit—"

"So what? So you demand my time to discuss a space gag with me? So they're all the same handwriting. Any idiot at Intelligence could have told you that. They covered that phase when Jordan Green first appeared. They were suspicious. Here!"

Admiral Callahan strode to a file cabinet and took out a thick file. He hurled it at Al Weston.

"Read it and learn some sense, young man. Now get out of here and don't bother coming back."

Weston took the file and left. His ears were burning and his mind was a tangle of cross-purposes and emotions. That was a rotten way to treat a man who'd been shot down on the first directive expedition.

He'd like to clip the so-and-so admiral's wings a bit. He'd—take it—he guessed, sourly, hearing a slight snicker behind him. He turned angrily but there was no one near.

That snicker? Was it real, or merely a breath of wind against the Venetian blind?

He entered the first bar he found. "Pulga and water," he said.

The bartender winced. "Does the Terran Captain forget that this is Mars?"

Weston had, but this was no time to admit a mistake.

"Not at all," he said.

"May I ask the Terran Captain to change his order?"

"I want it as I said it," snapped Weston.

"Does the Terran Captain understand that water is not plentiful? We on Mars have not the—the—plumbing as on Terra, where you cannot live without your water. We use but little personally and that mostly for washing. In washing, we absorb sufficient for our own metabolism."

"I'm aware of that."

"Then the Terran Captain may also be aware of the fact that our water is not —well—suited for internal consumption?"

"You have no bottled water?" demanded Weston angrily.

"That will be found only on the Terran Post. Please, be not angry. All newcomers forget."

"Forget it," snapped Weston and walked out.

Even the lowly bartenders of a conquered race made a fool of him. He entered another bar down the street and asked for pulga and vin, a completely native Martian potable. It was served without argument and went down right.

He had another and was halfway through it when he turned to see friends entering.

"Al!" they called. "How's it, man?"

WITH a weak smile he set down his drink and held out a welcoming hand.

"Hi, fellows. Haven't seen you in a year, Jack. Nor you, Bill. What's new?"

"Nothing much. Golly, we thought you were a real goner when they hit you that fatal day."

"I don't remember," said Weston.

"I'll bet you don't," said Bill with a smile. "You dropped back out of formation in a flaming instant and were gone. The rest of us were all right and won through. We hit Mars about o-three-hundred the next afternoon and, brother, did we hit 'em.

"We hurled the directive beam right down in the middle of Kanthanappois and laid the city flat! Then we headed North to Montharrin and singed 'em gently around the edges. You have no idea, Al boy, what a fierce thing you can toss out of a one-seater scooter when you've got directive power in it.

"They've never got the Fresno Beams down to a size practical for anything smaller than an eight-man job, you know. Well, directives make it possible to handle a four-turret from a one-man job. And a supercraft can carry enough stuff to move Mars."

"I missed it."

"We know, and we're sorry about that. Well, we can't all win."

"Don't be patronizing," snapped Al Weston.

"Sorry. We knew you'd have given most anything to have joined in the ruckus. Well —say, Al, I hear you've got a snap job now?"

"Well," said Al, disagreeing that it was a snap, and at the same time trying to justify its importance, "I'm trying to dig out the truth of this Jordan Green thing."

"You mean like over there?" grinned Jack, pointing to the legend on the wall.

"Uh—yeah, excuse me a moment," said Weston, going over and looking at it carefully.

"Getting to be an authority, hey, Al?" laughed Bill. "Gosh, that's a laugh of a job. Bet you have your fun."

"I think it is slightly stupid," said Weston harshly.

"Could be. It's no more stupid than a lot of jobs in this man's space navy, though. They sent a space admiral out once to measure the major diameter of all spacecraft to the maximum thousandth of an inch and didn't tell him for weeks that it had a deep purpose.

"He fumed and fretted until he discovered that it took a space admiral to hold enough rank to be permitted to measure that stuff

under the security regulations. Later they made all external space gear universal so that replacement quantities could be reduced. It saved about seven billion bucks—enough to pay the admiral's salary for a couple of millennia."

Jack laughed. "It's usually some lucky bird that gets these cockeyed commissions and has a swell time loafing all over the solar system on the government's dough."

"I don't consider myself lucky."

"We do," chimed one of the men. "We're stuck here along with seven million other high-brass policemen who'd rather play marbles," said Bill. "So what does it matter what you're doing, actually, so long as you're paying your way?"

"Well, I'd prefer something a bit more in my line."

"Who wouldn't?" responded Jack. "But what the heck? Remember the lines from Gilbert & Sullivan—*The Private Buffoon?* 'They won't blame you so long as you're funny'!"

"Very amusing," said Weston.

"Well, shucks, anytime you want to swap jobs—"

"I wouldn't mind," said Weston wistfully.

"Look, chum, take it easy. You wouldn't like sitting on your unretractable landing gear eight hours a day listening to a bunch of dirty Marties trying to talk you into slipping them a bit of a lush. Make you damned sick.

"But it's a job we've got to do and so long as we're hung with it, we're hung, and we'll give it our best. We know we can do most anything, so why should we worry?"

Bill grinned and nodded. "I'll bet even the bartender wouldn't like our job. Hey Soupy!"

"Would the Terran officers desire something?"

"Can you be honest?"

"Can anyone?" returned the barkeep. Like all barkeeps, he was about to start walking a fence between customers.

"How would you like to have my job?"

The barkeep looked at Bill. "You want an answer?"

Bill nodded.

THE barkeep shook his head. "Too much trouble. I am happy as I am. I, Terran officers, can mix the best veliqua on Mars, and no one on Terra can mix one at all. So I cannot drive a spacer, nor build a long range communicator. But I mix the best veliqua—observe?"

They observed as the barkeep made rapid motions with several bottles, whirled them overhead and came in on a tangent landing with three glasses, brimful to a bulging meniscus, without spilling a drop.

"Personally," grinned Bill, "I think we've just been hydraulic-pressured into buying a drink."

"Smart lad, he."

"I'd not put up with that. We didn't ask for it," objected Weston.

"No? Well, so what," grinned Bill, lifting the glass.

"It's okay," said Jack "But look, Al. You still sound as though you were enjoying life—or should be."

"I'm not."

"Well, Al, if you aren't, it's your fault."

"It wasn't my fault that I got clipped?"

"Hardly. No one is putting any blame on you for getting hung on the wrong end of a beam. Despite popular rumor, they don't hand out them things for cutting your hand on a can-opener," said Bill, nodding toward the purple ribbon on Weston's breast. It was beside another colored bit, awarded for his efforts in the initial directive attack.

"That one," said Weston, catching Bill's eye, "was a consolation prize. I didn't earn it."

"My friend, you must learn to tell the difference between humility and the job of fishing for compliments. Well, chum, you've had a rough time and we gotta go back and play traffic cop. Let us know if there's anything we can do."

Weston nodded. They left. They left him alone. Far back in his mind something mentioned the fact that they were on duty, but he thought they could have stayed around a bit longer.

He drank too much that long Martian afternoon and was definitely hung over most of the next day.

Al Weston gave up at that point. Never again would he try to prove his sorry plight to any one of his former friends. They all insisted upon looking at the brighter side of his life and ignored his trouble as though it did not exist.

They were glad enough to see him alive, it seemed, when he'd have preferred death to this lack-luster existence He wondered whether any of them would worry about him if he disappeared. Perhaps if they thought

he were dead—

Well, he had a four-mark commission, which entitled him among other things to commandeer anything now in the experimental field. He'd make a show of commandeering a directive power drive and then drop out of sight.

They'd suspect both his untimely end, and suspect the advisability of the directive drive. Then he'd show up and prove both worthy. That would give him his prestige again.

He'd do it at Pluto and, on the way, he'd stop at every way-station long enough to leave a wide trail. He'd enter a post, discuss Jordan Green at length. He'd take pictures, make tests and then head outward—to disappear for about a year. That would fix them all.

CHAPTER IV

Free For All

PLUTO," said Al Weston drily. He'd come through the entrance dome of one of the sealed cities and was standing atop the Corps Administration building, looking out over the sprawling city. Since Pluto was utterly cold, the sealed cities were the only habitable places on the planet and even they were too chilly for comfort.

He had no Pluto-garb, but he did have his spaceman's suit, which was internally heated. He, like most of the Corpsmen there, wore the spaceman's suit with the fishbowl swung back across his shoulderblades.

Some of them had had the helmets removed entirely, though this was troublesome around the entrance-locks because none of the men who were without their fishbowl headgear could work outside of the inner lock.

But—this was Pluto, and from here, as soon as he could leave, Al Weston was heading, just plain out!

In accordance with regulations he reported to the port commandant's office. This time he had no intention of forcing entry to the Inner Sanctum. His ears were still red from his last abortive effort. All he intended to do was to report to the office aide and, if the Big Brass wanted to see him, he'd eventually call.

Inside of the office was the usual scrawl—*Yes, Jordan Green has been even here!*

It was authentic and Weston said so aloud. The office aide looked up. "You're Senior Captain Weston?"

"I'm known?" asked he, slightly surprised.

"By reputation," grinned the clerk. "It's said that you can tell an authentic Jordan Green by seeing it through a visiscope."

"Not quite," said Weston.

"Have you uncovered anything yet, sir?" asked the aide.

"Are you interested?"

"Everyone is interested," said the clerk. "It will make a darned amusing yarn when you get all done."

"Uh-huh," grunted Weston. *Amusing,* he thought. Was his value to the Space Corps only an amusement value?

"See here," he said to the clerk, "I'd like to try a directive power drive."

"You were on the first directive power expedition against Mars, weren't you?" mused the clerk. "According to custom and regulations, you are entitled to any experimental equipment that you used during the war. Seems to me, too, that you are probably using more power for space flight than about ninety-eight percent of the corps at the present time. We have a directive power unit here."

"Then I can have it immediately?"

The clerk nodded. "I'm merely ruminating," he said to Weston. "I'd prefer several good reasons why you took it other than your fancy to try it out. It'll make the Old Man less fratchy.

"It's slightly haywire, of course, since it came right from the Power Laboratory with a boatload of long-hairs on a test mission. They left it here and we've been tinkering with it off and on. We can get a new one in a month or so, but you can have the haywire model if you'd prefer not to wait."

"I'll take it."

"Okay. I'll issue orders for the engine gang to swap power in your crate."

"Thanks," said Weston.

"Oh, and sir, I almost forgot. It's just an unfounded rumor and I've been unable to check the truth of it, but they claim there's a Jordan Green scrawl on Nergal, too."

"Nergal?" said Weston explosively. His mind envisioned a minute hunk of cosmic dust not much more than a hundred miles in diameter—Pluto's only claim to a satellite. It was better than thirteen million miles from

Pluto and its rotation was necessarily slow due to its tiny mass and great distance.

IT HAD been and would continue to be for some years, the solar object most distant from Sol.

It was uninhabited, airless, cold, forbidding, and completely useless.

There was not even a station on it. Science found the airless outer surface of Pluto more to their liking. On Pluto, at least, there was gravity to hold them down. The escape velocity of Nergal was not really known, but it must have been minute.

"Might be sheer fancy," said the clerk apologetically.

"Better check on it," said Weston. This was an opportunity. When he left it would be recorded that he went to Nergal. He even wished that he'd started to write his own name under the countless Jordan Green scrawls he'd visited. Then they could find one out there, and know he'd been there and from there . . . ?

In relaxation uniform, Weston sat in a small, out of the way restaurant and finished his dinner. He was the only uniformed man in the place, and so when the unlovely pair behind him made mention of the Corps, he knew they were talking about him.

He did not know them by name, but after a glimpse of them immediately labeled one of them as 'Dirty' and the other one as 'Ratty'. It was Ratty's voice that caught his attention. He missed the statement, but caught Dirty's answer.

"By the time all the Fancy Brass gets them, maybe we can have a couple too."

"The war's over," Ratty snarled. "Why does the Corps need directive drives?"

"How should I know? Ask Pretty, up there."

"He wouldn't know," snapped Ratty. "He's just taking orders."

"Must be nice to roam all over space with your feed and power free."

"Yeah, but he'd go broke if he had to live on what he's worth."

"That's why most guys get in the Corps anyway."

"That guy is spending about thirty thousand bucks just to track down a myth."

"Maybe his myth has a sister for me?" guffawed Dirty. "Wonder where he was hiding when the shooting was going on."

"He wouldn't say," grunted Ratty. "Mosta the dirty work was done by draftees."

"Well, now the schemozzle is over, he'll come out beating his chest and telling how he won the war. I'll bet he piloted a office desk and got that wound ribbon from pinching his finger in a desk drawer."

"Yeah, the Corps is rotten with slinkers."

"He's tooken months to track down this myth. Bet he makes it another year. Then they'll hang a medal on him for it."

"Any good spaceman could run Jordan Green down in a week," grunted Ratty.

"But it wouldn't be profitable to do it quick," answered Dirty with a leer in his voice.

Weston got up and went to their table.

"Sit down!" he snarled. "You, too!" he snapped at Dirty, taking the man by the jacket front and ramming him back in his chair with a crash. Heads looked up, and men faded back out of the way, clearing the area.

"One," said Weston. "I was in the hospital for seven months, unconscious from a fracas off Mars with the first directive power attack. Remember? I was doing a job so that stinkers like you could roam space unbothered by Martie pirates. Where were you? Hiding in a mine somewhere?

"At the present time if I spend five years rambling all over space looking for Jordan Green, you'll still owe me plenty. I wasn't making money while I was fighting. How much did you make? If it hadn't been for the Corps you'd be dead."

WESTON cuffed Dirty across the face with the back of his hand and spat into Ratty's face.

They rose with a roar and Ratty hurled table and chairs out of the way. They rushed Weston heavily.

Weston grinned.

He drove his fist into Ratty's stomach and sliced Dirty's throat with the edge of his hand.

Here was something tangible for Weston to fight! For almost a year, he had been railing at the wind, storming at an invisible hand of fate that had clipped him hard. The men before him were the embodiment of all his ill luck and he drove into them with a burning hatred to maim and destroy.

It was a dirty fight. The space rats had no qualms about sportsmanship and Weston had been tumble-trained on Terra to accept battle only when it was inevitable, at which point nothing was barred.

Dirty came in, hammering at his abdomen, and got a knee in the face. Ratty pulled a knife and rushed in with a slicing swing. Weston faded back, hit the bar, felt its edge crease his back as the rats moved after him.

He lashed out with a foot and drove Ratty and his knife back, turned to roll with a roundhouse swing from Dirty and his right arm knocked over a beer bottle. His right hand closed on the neck of the bottle, and he rapped it sharply against the edge of the bar, knocking off the base.

He kneed Dirty and closed with Ratty. He caught the knife-wielder in the face with the jagged bottle and thrust him back with a twisting punch of the bottle. There was a wordless scream.

Weston caught Dirty in the ribs with a hard fist and then cracked the man's head with what was left of the bottle. It shattered completely as Dirty staggered back and Weston dropped the useless end. They closed again, and wrestled viciously across the floor, tripped over a table and went down with a crash in a tight lock.

Dirty swung his elbow free and Weston missed catching it in the throat by a mite. Weston let go of Dirty's wrist and grabbed Dirty by the collar. Up he lifted and down he slammed.

Dirty's head made a thudding crack against the floor.

"Rye," gasped Weston and swallowed it neat.

Then he walked out, paused at the door and said:

"Call the cops and tell 'em to pick up—"

He left with a quizzical smile. He didn't even know their names.

He didn't stop to clean up, but entered his ship immediately. The directive power drive had been installed and he made radio contact with the control center that opened the locks in the sealed city.

He went out with a rush and hit the high trail for Nergal.

They'd give him a stupid job, would they? Well, he'd frittered enough on it. Now he was going to polish this off in a hurry and go back and hurl his commission in the teeth of Big Brass and stamp out snarling. A big strong man hunting a myth . . . !

NERGAL appeared within minutes under the directive drive. He landed and slapped the magnets on to keep him down. If there were anything to this rumor Jordan Green would have needed a wall or something to write his name on.

In the scanner Weston searched every square yard of his horizon and then moved. Four times he moved, each time searching his very limited line of sight circle. The fifth time he came upon a sheet of metal, fixed to a metal post, emanating out of a box.

He looped the ship into the air, caught box and post with a tractor and pulled it into the airlock.

Drifting free, he inspected the slab of metal.

Jordan Green has been here, it said in bold letters.

And below, on the top of the box, there was a pointer in gimbals. A surveyor's telescope. Gyro-stabilized it was and it pointed off slightly below the plane of the ecliptic. Weston took it to the observation dome and applied his eye to it as it stood. In the narrow field he saw the stars, and the crosshairs centered on a small one. Around the circumference of the reticule, tiny letters shone:

Jordan Green has been there too!

The star was Proxima Centauri.

"Oh, yeah?" growled Weston angrily. "That I have to see!"

Feeling challenged and outraged, Al Weston shoved in the Directive Power Drive all the way and headed across interstellar space for Proxima Centauri.

"Jordan Green!" he growled as the ship passed above the velocity of light. "That Jordan Green!"

He forgot the incongruity of Al Weston, the first man to penetrate interstellar space —seeking a phantom that claimed to have been on Alpha Centauri or, more practically, on one of the star's planets. All that Weston knew was that Jordan Green had been having fun at the expense of the Space Corps, just as Ratty and Dirty had in riding him.

It was a private fight. He might hate the High Command's brass but let no craven civilian criticize so much as the polish on the buttons of the third-assistant lubrication technician's uniform!

Jordan Green indeed! Well, Senior Captain Alfred Weston would bring this Jordan Green in by the ears.

And then they'd let Jordan Green explain his pranks.

CHAPTER V

Trail's End

THE humiliation of his project died. He began to feel a hearty dislike for Jordan Green. Not only had the joker caused waste of time and money and kilowatts during the war, he was now instrumental in the expenditure of time and money—and was keeping a qualified ranking officer from performing a task compatible with his training.

Weston growled and swore to finish up this job in quick time. He could then return to his rightful position and do a job that would set him up in his friends' eyes once more.

He considered Tony Larkin—a good enough fellow. Jeanne Tarbell—well, after all, he'd been ill and no girl could sit around all the time. Larkin was a nice enough egg and could be trusted. But Larkin would have to take a seat far to the rear when Weston returned!

He'd really show 'em!

The experimental spacecraft, driven by the experimental directive power unit, bored deeper and deeper into interstellar space and its velocity mounted high, running up an exponential scale that was calculated in terms of multiples of the speed of light.

He calculated turnover from sheer theory and a grasp of higher mathematics, since the heavens were an angry gray-blue outside of his ports. Then he decelerated and began to wait for the long long hours to pass before he could see how close his calculations were.

His clocks and chronometers went haywire and he lost track of time. He slept at odd moments, as he had done on the acceleration-half of this first interstellar trip.

The idea of interstellar travel came home to him. He, Al Weston, was making the first interstellar trip. The incongruity was not considered. He knew that he would find Jordan Green on some planet of Proxima Centauri. He began to enjoy the idea. His friends, Tom, Bill, Jack, all of them had considered him lucky. Well, confound Jordan Green, he was lucky!

And, regardless of what Jordan Green meant, he'd go down in history, not as a conquerer that went out with the Solar System's most destructive invention, but as the first peacetime user of directive power for interstellar flight. He'd comb the Centaurian system, and then return home with proof. He'd be his own hero!

His ship's velocity dropped below light and he set course for Proxima IV as a guess. He checked the panoramic receiver, located one very heavy signal coming from that planet and knew that he was right.

Not only would he be a Terran celebrity, he would also be an ambassador—first interstellar user of directive power and first discoverer of an extra-solar race of intelligences!

The planet was unpopulated!

Thick jungle covered it and it was full of wild life. On no hand could he see any sign of culture. There was no evidence but the single heavy signal, which he tracked halfway around the jungle-laden planet to land in a clearing beside a huge, white marble building.

On the lintel above the door were the words, in letters of shimmering jewel-like substance.

Here lives Jordan Green!

Weston smiled cynically. This—was it! He polished the knuckles of his right hand in the palm of his left hand, flexed both hands, loosed the needler in his holster and strode forward, hands at his sides, alert.

He hit the door with a hard straight-arm and sent it crashing open.

HE FACED four people, three men and a woman.

"Well, well!" he said, one portion of his mind wondering what to do about the woman when the shooting started. He disliked harming women but he knew that women had no compunctions against doing a man as best they could.

"Which of you—or how many of you—is or are Jordan Green?"

"Why?" asked the elder man mildly.

"Because I want to strangle him—or even her—slowly and painfully! Then I'm taking him—he, she or it—back to Terra to answer some questions!"

"Why?" asked the man. "Has he harmed you?"

Weston stopped short. To be honest with himself, Jordan Green had harmed no one, but he had been a plagued nuisance at least to Weston personally. Jordan Green was a sort of a symbol of something that caused him trouble.

"See here," he said. "They hung the job of locating Jordan Green on me, thinking

I needed some sort of cockeyed feather nest of a job because I couldn't handle anything real. I didn't want it, but they've tossed time and money into the job.

"Me—I want to take the joker back by the ears and show them that at least I'm worth their time and money and let them figure out whether my efforts were worth it. At least I've paid my way and done what they wanted me to do! Now—which?"

"What do you intend to do then?" asked the man. The younger man headed for a huge machine that stood inert, its pilot lights glimmering to show that it was ready to perform. The older called something in a strange tongue and the other one stopped and turned with puzzlement written in every line of his body.

"Who are you?" gritted Weston.

"I am called Dalenger. He is Valentor, she, his sister, Jasentor. The fourth is Desentin."

"I'm stupefied," gritted Weston. "A fine bunch of nom de plumes. Who are you? Or do I take you all back?"

"Tell me. Why are you angry?" asked Dalenger.

Al Weston told them. He told them of his ambition and his hopes and his own personal defeats—and though he did not know it he was extending himself to convince a total stranger that he, Weston, was a very unhappy man.

"And now, which of you is responsible for all the scribbling that's been going on?" he concluded.

Dalenger smiled. "Please sit down, Senior Captain Weston. Jasey! Get him a dollop of refreshments. I think we're about a have a talk!"

"Get to the point," snapped Weston.

"Patience, my friend. Look. Look well and see this room. We are official observers for the Galactic Union. We—"

"The *what?*" exploded Weston.

"In the galaxy are seventy-four suns, all peopled with humanoid races, entire stellar systems of us. We all possess what you call directive power. Not only is directive power the key to interstellar flight, but it is also the key to supremacy. That machine back there is an example. If the button behind the safety door is pressed your star will become a supernova because of our development of directive power.

"With such a means of wiping out an entire star-system, we must be certain that any newcomers who develop directive power will not be of a culture that is basically warlike, or filled with manifest destiny to rule the galaxy.

"This is harsh judgment, Senior Captain Weston, but it is a matter of being harsh or losing our lives. We are not cruel, but we are not soft where our future is at stake.

"Ergo, our detectors cover the galaxy, a job that would be impossible to do manually. At the first release of directive power we set up an observation post, such as you have found here, and we provide means to ensure a quick decision.

"When the first flight arrives we can judge the culture from the men who come with it. If the culture is favorable to the Galactic Union it is joined. If it is inimical or undesirable in any way, their sun becomes a supernova, wiping out the undesirable civilization immediately."

Weston looked at Dalenger with a hard, cynical glance.

"Like to play at being God?" he asked sharply.

"We do not. But we like to live!"

"You, I gather, are responsible for that Jordan Green gag?"

DALENGER smiled. "Yes. Your people have no doubt wondered how the fellow could get around as he did. Actually, it was a controlled-writing, using directive power from here. We have come no closer to your sun than this. Our grasp of your language was obtained by reading books, by listening to your radio and by other means—all available across the light-years by directive power.

"You see," said Dalenger, "if we came as emissaries we would be shown only that which your leaders wanted us to see. If we came as spies there would always be suspicion in your minds. Our spying is restricted to learning your language and setting up the means by which you will seek us out."

"But this Jordan Green business?"

"There are a number of reasons why a race will seek the origin of such a joke. A well-developed sense of humor and the willingness to spend money on such is desirable. Suspicion is not bad, depending upon whether it is sheer hatred of the alien or a desire to maintain integrity."

Weston thought for a moment. They were going to judge his race by him. He con-

sidered and came to the conclusion that he was a sorry specimen to grade an entire culture on.

"How can you grade a race on one specimen?" he said.

"Since the specimen is usually a competent man, highly trained, a scientist, we normally discount him a bit. A hand-picked sample is never representative, but represents the peak of the race."

Weston swallowed. "But look," he said. "That is not fair. I'm—"

"Senior Captain Weston, you strode in here angry. You displayed no sense of humor. You snarled and promised us all bodily harm and accused us of having interfered with your plans. Right?"

"Yes—but—"

"Yet," said Dalenger, "you were changing. You see, Weston, you were a sick man. There is one characteristic that is quite desirable. It is a sense of social responsibility to the individual by the collective government. Most undesirable is the type that claims the individual must be immersed in the good of the state.

"In one extension this sense is called pity. In the other extension it is called pride. You were hurt and you became ill mentally. And, instead of casting you out, your fellow men gave you a job that would result in your convalescence regardless of success or failure, providing that you yourself managed to follow through—in any manner. You did, by desperation and anger.

"We don't always judge by the mental calibre of the man who comes. We must consider the reason why he was selected. We don't value personal feelings in judgment of a race—we'd be inevitably wrong if we valued the opinion of a psychoneurotic.

"The judging was finished when I called Desentin to stop. He is young and impetuous and was about to press the button. So, Senior Captain Alfred Weston, we welcome you and your race to the Galactic Union!"

Weston blinked. He'd fought against it. He'd been angry at something every instant of the time between his awakening after the disaster to the present moment—angry because there was nothing he could do to gain real recognition. So they hung a joke-job on him to cure him!

And, by the grace of the gods and a long-handled spoon, he had walked into a situation that might have caused the destruction of the entire Solar System but for some deep understanding on the part of an alien culture.

He—Al Weston, psychoneurotic—in the position of being an emissary!

He took the glass offered by Jasentor, lifted it to the four of them and drained it with a gesture.

And for the first time in more than a year, the sound of Weston's honest laughter filled the room.

Cured!

Eight small figures, clad in buckskin leggins and with scalp locks, materialized on the rug

THE RELUCTANT SHAMAN

By L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

Virgil Hathaway, Penobscot medicine man, suddenly finds himself the possessor of eight stone-throwing sprites!

ONE fine July day a tourist took his small boy into a shop in Gahato, New York. The sign over the shop read:

CHIEF SOARING TURTLE
Indian Bead-Work—Pottery

Inside, a stocky, copper-colored man stood amidst a litter of burnt-leather cushions, Navajo blankets made in Connecticut, and similar truck.

"Have you got a small bow-and-arrow outfit?" the tourist asked.

"Ugh," said the Indian. He rummaged and produced a small bow and six arrows with rubber knobs for heads.

"Are you a real Indian?" the boy asked.

"Ugh. Sure. Heap big chief."

"Where are your feathers?"

"Put away. Only wear um for war-dance."

The tourist paid and started out. At that instant a copper-colored boy of fifteen years entered from the back.

"Hey, Pop, one of the kittens just et the other!" he called loudly.

The Indian lost his barbaric impassiveness. "What? Jeepers Cripus, what kind of mink farmers do you call yourself? I told you to shift 'em to separate cages yesterday, before they began to fight!"

"I'm sorry, Pop. I guess I forgot."

"You'd better be sorry. That be good money throwed down the sewer."

The tourist's car door slammed, and as the car moved off the thin voice of the tourist's little boy was wafted back:

"He talks just like anybody else. He don't sound like a real Indian to me."

But Virgil Hathaway, alias Chief Soaring Turtle, was a real Indian. He was a Penobscot from Maine, forty-six years old, a high-school graduate, and, except that he did not bathe as often as some people thought he should, a model citizen.

Shortly after the departure of the tourist, another man came in. This visitor had Hathaway's distinctive muddy coloring and Mongoloid features, though he was fatter, shorter, and older than Hathaway.

"Morning," he said. "You're Virgil Hathaway, ain'tcha?"

"That's who I be, mister."

The man smiled so that his eyes disappeared in fat. "Pleased to know you, Mr. Hathaway. I'm Charlie Catfish, of the Senecas."

"That so? Glad to know you, Mr. Catfish. How about stopping over for some grub?"

"Thanks, but the folks want to make Blue Mountain Lake for lunch. Tell you what you can do. I got eight stone-throwers with me. They was let come up here providing they behaved. I got enough to do without dragging them all over, so if you don't mind I'll leave 'em in your charge."

"Stone-throwers?" repeated Hathaway blankly.

"You know, *Gahunga.* You can handle 'em even though you're Algonquin, being as you're a descendant of Dekanawida."

"I be what?"

"A descendant of Hiawatha's partner. We keep track—" A horn blast interrupted him. "Sorry, Mr. Hathaway, gotta go. You won't have no trouble." And the fat Indian was gone.

HATHAWAY was left puzzled and uneasy. It was nice to be descended from Dekanawida, the great Huron chief and co-founder of the Iroquois League. But what were *Gahunga?* His smattering of the Iroquoian dialects included no such term.

Then there was another customer, and after her Harvey Pringle lounged in wearing a sport shirt that showed off his strength and beauty.

"Hi, Virgil," he drawled. "How's every little thing?"

"Pretty good, considering." Hathaway felt a sudden urge to bring his accounts up to date. Young Pringle could waste more time in one hour than most men could in three.

"I finished my ragweed pulling for today."

"Huh?" said Hathaway.

"Yeah. The old man got shirty again about my not doing anything. I said, why take a job away from some poor guy that needs it? So I appointed myself the county's one-man ragweed committee. I pull the stuff up for one hour a day, heh-heh! Babs been in?"

"No," replied Hathaway.

"Oh, well, she knows where to find me." Harvey Pringle yawned and sauntered out. Hathaway wondered what Barbara Scott could see in that useless hulk. Then he listened to the noise.

It was like a quick, faint drumming, queerly muffled, as though the drum were half full of water. Hathaway looked out the screen-door; no parade. Timothy-weeds nodded peacefully in the breeze, and from the Moose River came the faint scream of old man Pringle's sawmill.

The noise seemed to be behind Hathaway, in the shop, like the sound of a small Delco plant in the cellar. The noise increased. It waxed, and eight figures materialized on the rug. They looked like Iroquois warriors two feet tall, complete with moccasins, buckskin leggings, and scalps shaven except for stiff crests on the crown. One squatted and tapped a three-inch drum. The other seven circled around him, occasionally giving the loon-cry by slapping the hand against the mouth while uttering a long shrill yell.

"Hey!" barked Hathaway. The drumming stopped. "Who the devil be you?"

The drummer spoke:

"Adenlozlakstengen agoiyo—"

"Whoa! Don't you speak English?"

"Ayuh, mister. I though if you was a medicine-man, you'd talk Iroquois—"

"If I was what?"

"Medicine-man. Charlie said he was gonna leave us with one while he went to Canada."

"Be you the stone-throwers?"

"Ayuh. I'm chief, name of Gaga, from Cattaraugus County. Anything you want us to do?"

"Yeah. Just disappear for a while." The *Gahunga* disappeared. Hathaway thought that Charlie Catfish had played a dirty trick on him, to spring these aboriginal spooks without explanation.

He brightened when Barbara Scott entered, trim, dark, and energetic. Hathaway approved of energy in other people.

"Have you seen Harvey, Virgil?" she asked. "I had a lunch date with him."

"Uh-huh," said Hathaway. "Prob'ly sleeping on somebody's lawn."

Miss Scott stiffened. "You're as bad as the rest, Virgil. Nobody's fair to poor Harvey."

"Forget it," said Hathaway with a helpless motion of his hands. When a girl toward whom you felt a fatherly affection seemed bent on marrying the worthless son of the town's leading businessman, who was also your landlord, there wasn't much a moderate man could do. "You still be having that séance tomorrow night?"

"Yep. Dan Pringle's coming."

"*What?* He swears you're a fake."

"I know, but maybe I can win him over."

"Look here, Babs, why does a nice girl like you do all this phony spook business?"

"Money, that's why. Being a secretary and notary won't get me through my last year of college. As for being phony, how about that ug-wug dialect you use on the tourists?"

"That be different."

"Oh, that be different, be it? Here's Harvey now; so long."

The eight *Gahunga* reappeared.

"What you want us to do for you, mister?" asked Gaga. "Charlie told us to be helpful, and by *Iuskeha*, we're gonna be."

"Don't exactly know," Hathaway cautiously replied.

"Is there anything you want?"

"Well," said Hathaway, "I got a good breeding female mink I wish somebody'd offer me five hundred bucks for."

THE *Gahunga* muttered together.

"I'm afraid we can't do anything about that," Gaga said finally. "Anything else?"

"Well, I wish more customers would come in to buy my Indian junk."

"Whoopee! U-u-u-u!" shrilled Gaga, drumming. "Come on!"

The seven pranced and stamped for a few seconds, then vanished. Hathaway uneasily waited on a customer, wondering what the *Gahunga* were up to.

Earl Delacroix, owner of The Pines Tea-Shoppe. was passing on the other side of the street, when he leaped and yelled. He came down rubbing his shoulder and looking about resentfully. As soon as he started to walk, there was a flat *spat* of a high-speed pebble striking his clothes, and he jumped again. *Spat! Spat!* The bombardment continued until he hurled himself into Chief Soaring Turtle's shop.

"Somebody's shooting me with an air-rifle!" he gasped.

"Bad business," agreed Hathaway.

There was another yell, and Hathaway looked out. Leon Buttolf was being driven inexorably down the street to the shop. As soon as he was inside, the bombardment overtook Mrs. Camaret, wife of a worker in Pringle's mill.

By the time she had been herded in, the streets were deserted.

"Somebody ought to go to jail for this," Buttolf said.

"That's right," said Delacroix. He looked keenly at Hathaway. "Wonder how everybody gets chased in here?"

"If I sink you have somesing to do wiz zis, Virgil, I tell my Jean," Mrs. Camaret said. "He come, beat you up, stomp you into a leetle jelly!"

"Jeepers Cripus!" protested Hathaway. "How should I make a BB shot fly out in a circle to hit a man on the far side? And my boy Calvin's out back with the mink. You can go look."

"Aw, we ain't suspecting you," said Buttolf.

"I'll walk with you wherever you be going, and take my chances of getting hit," Hathaway said.

"Fair enough," said Delacroix. So the four went out and walked down the street a way. Delacroix turned into his restaurant, and the others went about their business. Hathaway hurried back to his shop just as a pebble hit Wallace Downey in the seat of the pants.

"Gaga!" Hathaway yelled in desperation. "Stop it, blast your hide!" The bombardment ceased. Downey walked off with a look of deep suspicion. When Hathaway entered his

shop, the *Gahunga* were sitting on the counter.

Gaga grinned infuriatingly.

"We help you, huh, mister?" he said. "Want some more customers?"

"No!" shouted Hathaway. "I don't want your help. I hope I shan't ever see you again!"

The imps exchanged startled glances. Gaga stood up.

"You don't want to be our boss no more?"

"No! I only want you to leave me alone!"

Gaga drew himself to his full twenty-five inches and folded his arms.

"Okay. We help somebody who appreciates us. Don't like Algonquins anyway." He drummed, and the other seven *Gahunga* did a solemn dance down the counter, disappearing as they came to the pile of miniature birch-bark canoes.

In a few minutes Hathaway's relief was replaced by a faint unease. Perhaps he had been hasty in dismissing the creatures; they had dangerous potentialities.

"Gaga!"

Nothing happened. Calvin Hathaway put in his head.

"Did you call me, Pop?"

"No. Yes I did. Ask your maw when dinner's gonna be ready."

It *had* been a mistake; what would he tell Catfish?

After dinner Hathaway left his wife in charge of the shop while he went for a walk to think. In front of Tate's hardware store he found a noisy group consisting of old man Tate, Wallace Downey, and a state trooper. Tate's window was broken, and he was accusing Downey of breaking it and stealing a fishing-rod. Downey accused Tate of throwing the rod at him through the window. Each produced witnesses.

"I was buying some film for my camera in the store when bingo! away goes the winda," a witness said. "Mr. Tate and me, we look around, and we see Wally making off with the rod."

"Did you see Downey inside the window?" asked the trooper.

"No, but it stands to reason—"

"What's your story?" the trooper interrupted him, as he turned inquiringly at Downey.

"I was sitting on the steps of the bank havin' a chaw, when Wally comes along carrying that reel, and *zowie!* out comes the rod through the winda, with busted glass all over the place. If old man Tate didn't throw it at him somebody musta."

PUZZLED, the trooper scratched his head. Finally, since Tate had his rod back and the window was insured, he persuaded the two angry men to drop the matter.

"Hello, Virgil," said Downey. "Why does everything screwy have to happen in this town? Say, do you know anything about those BB shot? You yelled something, and they quit."

"I don't know nahthing," said Hathaway innocently. "Some kid with an air-rifle, I suppose. What was all this run-in with Tate?"

"I went down to the river to fish," explained Downey. "I had a new tackle, and I no sooner dropped it off the bridge than I got a strike that busted the rod right off short. Musta been the biggest loss in the river. Well, I saved the reel, and I was bringin' it back home when old man Tate shies a new rod at me, right through his window."

Hathaway could see how the *Gahunga* were responsible for these events; they were being "helpful." He left Downey and sauntered down Main Street, passing the Adirondack Association office. Barbara Scott made a face at him through the glass. Hathaway thought she needed to be spanked, either on account of the séances, or her infatuation with Harvey Pringle, or both.

Returning to his shop, the middle-aged Indian noted that the Gahato Garage seemed to have an unusually brisk trade in the repair of tires. The cars included the trooper's Ford with all four tires flat. Bill Bugby and his mechanics were working on tires like maniacs.

The trooper who had handled the Tate-Downey incident was walking about the street, now and then stooping to pick up something. Presently he came back.

"Hey, Bill!" he shouted, and conferred in low tones with Bugby, who presently raised his voice. "You're crazy, Mark!" he cried. "I ain't never done a thing like that in all the years I been here!"

"Maybe so," said the trooper. "But you got to admit that somebody scattered bright new nails all over this street. And if you didn't, who did?"

Hathaway prudently withdrew. He knew who had scattered the nails.

* * * * *

Newcomb, the game warden, lounged into

Chief Soaring Turtle's shop and spread his elbows along a counter. Hathaway asked him what he was looking so sad about.

The warden explained.

"I was walking by the bank this afternoon, when a big car drives up and a young man gets out and goes in the bank," he said. "There was a canvas bundle on the back of the car. I didn't think anything of it, only just as I get past it the canvas comes tearing off the bundle, like somebody is pulling it, and there on the bumper is tied a fresh-killed fawn."

"You don't say so?"

"Three months out of season, and no more horns than a pussy-cat. Well, you know and I know there's some of that all the time. I run 'em in when I catch 'em, and if it makes me unpopular that's part of my job. But when this young man comes out and I ask him about it, he admits it—and then it turns out he's Judge Dusenberry's son. Half the village is looking on, so I got to run young Dusenberry in."

"Will that get you into trouble?"

"Don't know; depends on who wins the election next fall. Now, Virgil, I'm not superstitious myself. But some of these people are, especially the Canucks. There's talk of your putting a hoodoo on the town. Some have had rocks thrown at 'em, or something, and Wallace Downey is saying you stopped them. If you can stop it, why can't you start it?"

"I don't know a thing about it," said Hathaway.

"Of course, you don't—I realize that's all nonsense. But I thought you ought to know what folks are saying." And Newcomb slouched out, leaving behind him a much worried Indian.

The next day, Hathaway left his wife in charge of the shop and drove towards Utica. As he was turning onto the state highway, Barbara Scott walked past and called good-morning. He leaned out.

"Hi, Barbara! Be you still going to have your spook-hunt?"

"You bet, Chief Wart-on-the-Nose."

"What'll you do if old man Pringle gets up and denounces you as a fake?"

"I don't tell my victims I'm not a fake. I say they can watch and judge for themselves. You don't believe in spirits, do you?"

"Never did. Until a little while ago, that is."

"What the devil do you mean by that crack, Virgil?"

"Oh, just some funny things that happened."

BARBARA tactfully refrained from pressing for details.

"I never did either, but lately I've had a feeling I was being followed," she said. "And *this* morning I found *this* on my dresser." She held out a slip of paper on which was scrawled:

"Don't you worry none about Daniel Pringel that old sower-puss. We will help you against him—G.

"I got an idea who sent this, but it won't do no good to explain now," Hathaway mused. "Only I'd like to see you before your séance. G'by."

Three hours later Hathaway gave up his search through the stacks of the Utica Public Library, having gone through every volume on anthropology, folklore, and allied subjects. He had learned that the stone-throwers belonged to the genus of sprite known to the Iroquois as *Dzhungeun.* They all lived in the southwest part of the state, and comprised the stone-throwing *Gahunga,* the fertility-producing *Gendayah,* and the hunting and burrowing *Ohdowa.* But although it was intimated in several places that the Iroquois shamans had known how to control these spirits, nowhere did it tell how.

Hathaway thought a while. Then he left the library and walked along Genesee street to a pay telephone. He grunted with pain when he learned the cost of a call to the vicinity of Buffalo, but it couldn't be helped. He resolved, if he ever caught up with Charlie Catfish, to take the money either out of the Seneca's pocket or out of his hide.

"Give me the Tonawanda Reservation," he said.

When he got the reservation, he asked for Charlie Catfish. After a long wait, during which he had to feed the coin-box he was told that Catfish wouldn't be back for weeks.

"Then give me Chief Cornplanter."

Another pause. Then: "He's gone to Buffalo for the day."

"Listen," said Hathaway. "Have you got any medicine-men, hexers, spook-mediums, or such people among you?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I be Virgil Hathaway, of the Penobscots, member of the Tutle clan and descendant of Dekanawida." He explained his difficulties. The voice said to wait; presently an aged voice speaking badly broken English came

from the receiver.

"Wait, please," said Hathaway. "I got to get me a pencil. My Seneca ain't so hot. . . ."

* * * * *

When Hathaway was driving back to Gahato, he attempted to pass a truck on one of the narrow bridges over the Moose River at McKeever. The truck driver misjudged his clearance, and Hathaway's car stopped with a rending crunch, wedged between the truck and the bridge girders. When the garage people got the vehicles untangled and towed to the garage, Hathaway learned that he faced a four-hour twenty-dollar repair job before he could start moving again, let alone have his fenders straightened. And the afternoon train north had just left McKeever.

That evening Barbara Scott had collected the elite of Gahato for her séance: Doc Lenoir and his wife; Levi Macdonald; the bank cashier, and his better half; and the Pringles, father and son, and a couple of other persons. Dan Pringle greeted Barbara with a polite but cynical smile. He was plump and wheezed, and had seldom been worsted in a deal.

Barbara sat her guests in a circle in semi-darkness to await the arrival of her "influences." When Harvey Pringle had fallen asleep, she got out her paraphernalia. She sat on a chair in the cabinet, a thing like a curtained telephone-booth, and directed the men to tie her securely to the chair. Then she told them to drop the curtain and put out the lights, and warned them not to risk her health by turning on the lights without authorization. It was not an absolutely necessary warning, as she could control the lights herself by a switch inside the cabinet.

On the table between the cabinet and the sitters were a dinner-bell, a trumpet, and a slate. The chair on which Barbara sat came apart easily. Concealed in the cabinet was a quantity of absorbent cotton for ectoplasm. There was also a long-handled grasping device by which grocery clerks pick things off high shelves; it was painted black. Her own contribution to the techniques of this venerable racket was a system of small lights which would warn her if any of the sitters left his chair.

SOON Barbara gave the right kind of squirm, and the trick chair came apart. The loose bonds could now be removed. Barbara moaned to cover the sounds of her preparations, and chanted a few lines from the *Iliad* in Greek. She intended to have Socrates as one of her controls this time.

She was still peeling rope when she was astonished to hear the dinner-bell ring. It wasn't a little *ting* such as would be made by someone's accidentally touching it, but a belligerent clangor, such as would be made by a cook calling mile-away farm-hands. The little signal-lights showed all the sitters to be in their seats. The bell rang this way and that, and the trumpet began to toot.

Barbara Scott had been séancing for several years, and had come to look upon darkness as a friend, but now childish fears swarmed out of her. The cabinet began to rock. She screamed. The cabinet rocked more violently. The door of the false side flew open; the cotton and the grasper were snatched out. The curtain billowed. The table began to rock too. From the darkness came an angry roar as the grasper tweaked Doc Lenoir's nose.

From somewhere came the muffled beat of a drum, and a long ululating loon-cry:

"U-u-u-u-u-u-u-u!"

The cabinet tipped over against the table. Barbara fought herself out of the wreckage. She remembered that her private light-switch was in series with the room's main switch, so that the lights could not be turned on until the secret switch had been thrown. She felt for it, pushed it, and struggled out of the remains of the cabinet.

The terrified sitters were blinded by the lights, and dumb at the spectacle of the medium swathed in loose coils of rope with her hand on the switch, her dress torn, and the beginnings of a black eye. Next they observed that the bell, slate, grasper, and other objects were swooping about the room under their own power.

When the lights came on, there was a yell and a command in an unknown language. The slate smashed down on Dan Pringle's head. While he stood blinking, glasses dangling from one ear and the frame of the slate around his neck, other articles went sailing at him. He stumbled over his overturned chair and bolted for the door. The articles followed.

When Pringle reached the street, pebbles began picking themselves up and throwing themselves after the mill-owner. It took about three tries to get his range. Then a pebble no bigger than the end of your thumb, tavelling with air-rifle speed, hit the back of his thigh with a flat *spat*. Pringle yelled,

staggered, and kept running. Another glanced off his scalp, drawing blood and making him see stars.

The inhabitants of Gahato were entertained by the unprecedented sight of their leading businessman panting down the main street and turning purple with effort. Every now and then there would be the sound of a pebble striking. Pringle would make a bucking jump and come down running harder than ever.

His eye caught a glimpse of Virgil Hathaway letting himself into his shop, and a faint memory of silly talk about the Indian's supernatural powers stirred his mind. He banked and galloped up the porch steps of Soaring Turtle's establishment just as Hathaway closed the screen door behind him. Pringle went through the door without bothering to reopen it.

"Jeepers Cripus!" exclaimed Hathaway mildly. "What be the matter, Dan?"

"L-l-isten, Virgil! Are you a medicine-man?"

"Aw, don't pay no attention to superstitious talk like that—"

"But I gotta have help! They're after me!" And he told all.

"Well!" said Hathaway doubtfully. "I'll see what I can do. But they're Iroquois spooks, and don't think much of us Algonquins. Got some tobacco? All right, pull down the shades."

Hathaway took Pringle's tobacco-pouch and opened his shattered screen door. He threw a pinch of tobacco into the dark, and chanted in bad Seneca:

> I give you tobacco, Dzhungeun,
> Wanderers of the mountains.
> You hear me and will come.
> I give you tobacco.
> I have done my duty towards you.
> Now you must do yours.
> I have finished speaking.

ALL eight *Gahunga* imps materialized on the lawn. Hathaway sternly ordered them to come inside. When they were in, he questioned them:

"What have you little twerps been up to now?" he asked.

Gaga squirmed.

"We was only trying to do Miss Scott a favor," he said. "She wants to put on a good spook show. So we help. She don't like this old punkin Pringle. All right, we throw a scare into him. We wasn't going to hurt him none."

"You know you was let come up here for your vacations only if you didn't use your stone-throwing powers," Hathaway said. "And you know what Eitsinoha does to little imps who don't behave."

"*Eitsinoha?*" cried Gaga. "You wouldn't tell *her!*"

"Dunno, yet. You deserve it."

"Please, mister, don't say nothing! We won't throw even a sand-grain! I swear by *Iuskeha!* Let us go, and we'll head right back to Cattaraugus!"

Hathaway turned to the quivering Pringle. "Changed your mind about raising my rent, Dan?"

"I'll lower it! Five Dollars!"

"Ten?"

"Seven and a half!"

"Okay. Gaga, you and your boys can disappear. But stick around. And don't do *anything,* understand, unless I tell you to." The *Gahunga* vanished.

Pringle recovered some of his usual self-assurance and said:

"Thanks, Virgil! Don't know what I'd have done without you."

"That's all right, Dan. You better not say anything about this, though. Remember, being a medicine-man is a kind of joke among us Indians, like being the High Exalted Potentate of one of those there lodges."

"I understand. So they were doing her a favor, huh? It would be bad enough to have my son marry a phony medium, but I can see where a real one would be worse. No sale, and you can tell her I said so. And Harvey'll do what I say, because he has to in order to eat."

"But—" said Hathaway. He wanted to defend Barbara Scott; to tell Pringle that even if she was a crooked medium in a mild way, she was still better than that no-count son of his.

"What?" said Pringle.

"Nahthing." Hathaway reconsidered; everything was working out fine. Barbara would get over her crush on that big loafer, finish her college, and be able to drop the medium racket. Why stir things up? "Goodnight, Dan."

He hadn't done badly, thought Hathaway as he locked up, considering that he'd only been in the medicine-man business a couple of days. He must take a trip out to Tonawanda in the fall, and look up Charlie Catfish. Maybe the thing had commercial possibilities.

(Continued from page 8)

and unscrupulous operators.

Second on the list is THE BIG NIGHT, by Hudson Hastings, an interplanetary novelet—with a difference. The author's flair for imaginative detail makes the sorry predicament of the spaceship *La Cucaracha,* battling the competition of space transmission, come to life in impressive fashion. This is one of the finest novelets of the spaceways we've ever seen—and you'll think so too, when you read it.

And finally, the new and brilliant William Fitzgerald contributes the second in his series about Bud Gregory, the illiterate wizard of the Great Smokies, THE NAMELESS SOMETHING. This story picks up where the first left off, with Bud in flight from officialdom after the near catastrophe that followed his inadvertent creation of an unshielded atomic pile.

Murphy, the Government scientist, is after him, since the country is threatened with war and Gregory is the one man who can possibly save our cities from the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He finds Gregory ultimately—but finds him in such a desperate predicament that the odds are a thousand to one against either of them escaping a ridiculous but none the less deadly fate. A grand story by a grand new author.

And then, of course, there will be short stories and THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY and, of course, your speaker-back at the reader who speaks. The June TWS should be a memorable issue.

LETTERS FROM READERS

THE plea for something besides mere criticism from reader-epistolers seems to be bearing fruit of a sort. But whether the resulting collection of anagrams, conundrums et cetera is the sort of thing we are after is a matter for you readers to decide. At any rate, here we go, into the wide blues hither. . . .

DERBYSHIRE AND CHESTERFIELD
By Thomes E. McCourt

Congratulations on your decision to "grow up." When, last year, I was fortunate enough to get a subscription to TWS I was disgusted at the amount of childish drivel printed in THE READER SPEAKS section. However, now a start has been made, perhaps we may once again see the old mag. take its rightful place amongst the leaders of this type of fiction.

Could you clean up the illustrations next? I'm no prude, I hope, but it does seem a little unnecessary to drag in at least one scantily clothed female per story. Also a plea for better stories. If you mean to break with the old childish policy, let's have stories to suit. You do get an occasional good yarn printed, "Things Pass By" and "Dead City" are two instances, but generally speaking the standard is low.

In conclusion let me say that as applied pressure seems to have caused the change for the better, isn't it time we s-f readers did something more about it? If this letter is published may I ask all who agree with my point of view (if any) to write in to Sergeant Saturn, (I repeat the name with distaste) and tell him what we want. If he receives enough requests for a general all-round improvement we might get it. What about it?—*38 Devonshire Road, New Whittington, Chesterfield, Derbyshire, England.*

We would very much like to know what issues of TWS Comrade McCourt is writing about. Surely last issue with its Leinster and Cahill novelets and the current number with Leinster, Kuttner and Fitzgerald, to say nothing of the improved short stories, should be closer to his tastes.

And as for the Sarge, where is he? Becoming mighty hard to find and purposely so. At any rate, we are in there pitching . . . on everything but them undraped femmes. We still like them that way, though for that matter plenty of our stories appear without same in the illustrations.

What is he beefing about anyway?

BROTHER GOOSE
By Peter Leyva

I have to agree with you and a host of other fans that the Battle of the Trimmed Edges, aeon-long conflict though it is, should be relegated to the all-devouring maw of the editorial waste basket.

I propose that you include upon the mag cover every issue a legend stating defiantly, to wit: THIS MAGAZINE HAS UNTRIMMED EDGES. CAVEAT EMPTOR.

The same goes for the anti-Bergey clan who every issue wax eloquent in their epistolary denouncements anent this modern Rembrandt's pin-up cover gals. Personally, I kinda like his cover B. E. Ms (Bergey's Elegant Maidens).

Being that you publish magazines, not manholes, you don't have to worry about the covers too much.

Regarding some suggestions; howzabout a page or two in the mag featuring a short biography on both leading and not so well known scientists, ancient, mediaeval and modern, and a paragraph or two on their theories and good works performed.

Though some of the Ether Vibrationists may be able to rattle off Einstein's Theory of Relativity as if it were a Mother Goose rhyme, I confess some of us lesser intelligentsia (like I and my alter ego) are a rather sorry lot. Shamefacedly I submit that I can't square a circle, work out a formula for tempering copper, nor do I have the slightest idea of how the great pyramid of Khufu was built.

Being that you are trying to encourage scientific debate or at least something different from the usual Bergey blasts and story criticisms, I hereby, and as a starter for a lusty tête-á-tête, cast the well-gnawed bone of time-travel to the scientific wolves.

Some one enlighten me on the following:

If a gent, in the year of 2047, has, for instance, painted a house red, and our hero of 1947, hops into his time flivver, sets his controls for 2047, and assuming that he arrives at his destination, it still should be impossible for him to actually see that red house. Why?

Well, as Plato said, nothing can be seen in its real shape and form. All that we can see of anything is the reflected light of the object that we look upon. Hence, how can said red house be noted by our brave time-traveling hero, when the light that would fall upon the house that day is not scheduled to leave the sun in another hundred years? By what light, then, does our hero see anything in the time travel stories that we read?

After all, the sun doesn't know about our hero's time excursion, not having been let in on the secret.—*221 So. Victoria Ave., Atlantic City, N. J.*

Well, our only suggestion in answer to your

problem is that perhaps the hero wore polarized sun-glasses. Any other solutions remain welcome.

A PIMIENTO FROM OLIVER
By Chad Oliver

The December TWS reared its lurid head upon these fair premises just as I was feverishly pounding away on an English theme anent Thomas Hardy's RETURN OF THE NATIVE. Thus TWS will have to wait awhile and be digested in chunks. Still, there are a couple of points I'd like to sound off on to you personally.

First, many thanks for giving us a de Camp tale. He is, to me, the most literate writer ever produced by stfantasy. The fact that he usually writes in a light vein does not alter the fact that his conclusions and ideas are more forcefully brought home to the reader than any other writer now dabbling in The Field. He is, also, a simply beautiful writer.

Second—Henry Kuttner doing a Hollywood-on-the-Moon thing next issue after such classics as CALL HIM DEMON! Hank seems to write great stuff effortlessly—it is, I mean, about as easy for him to write a DARK WORLD as a PLIGHT OF HECTOR DIDDLEBOTTOM. So why such trivia?

Third—every pic this trip by Mad Mark. This, sir, is a new low.

Fourth—I love my fellow letter hacks. In the current session, one remark by one Alan D. Jones slays me. It's on page 100, directly above Chadrack. This fellow has keen insight. The sentence: " . . . for a story which was excellent without having any outstanding parts in it."

Lastly, I liked the book reviews and think you did a very nice job thereon. Taine's THE TIME STREAM *was* a fine novel, and SKYLARK OF SPACE wasn't. However, you might have mentioned the fact that Dr. Smith has since graduated from the "gee whiz" school. Author's comments were interesting this trip, too—you could almost see a brain cell or two forced reluctantly into spasmodic activity.

I think TWS is making a real attempt to move forward, and you deserve a helping hand from all stfantasy lovers.—*1023 Bonham Terrace, Austin, Texas.*

Gee whiz, yourself, Chad—and thanks. Incidentally there is a bathetic something about your close juxtaposition of Thomas Hardy and our more or less advanced STF. Wonder what "Old Tom" thought about such matters. —or did he?

As for Dr. Smith's metamorphosis, your critic has to call the books as he sees, or rather reads, them. And SKYLARK OF SPACE was so bad he wonders why on earth it was selected for binding. Nothing is more baffling to an editor than a publisher—and once again vice versa. They operate from opposite poles.

PURPLE BEMS—OUR ANAPAESTIC FOOT!
By Evangeline Brunson

Long and faithfully I've followed your column, hanging upon your every printed word (and don't say I deserve to hang!). Now I find that I can maintain silence no longer, so I'm burtsing forth in a paean of praise which I'm optimistic enough to hope you'll print. Even if you head it "Verse and Worse" I'll try to forgive you.

T. W. S.! Great S. T. F.!
Oh, alphabetic gems!
You lead me through a nightmare world,
Pursued by purple BEMS.

I leave my home, my friends, my foes,
I push aside the stars,
That I may shudder through the hours
On Mercury or Mars.

I turn each page from age to age,
I read the livelong night.
My eyes grow wide, my ways grow wild,
My hair is turning white!

Yet still I seek . . . yet still I buy . . .
Yet still I read the stuff!
And, though my reason's tottering,
I cannot get enough!

For certainly Horatio,
In his philosophies,
Though he had dined on cold mince pies,
Dreamt not of things like these!

And so, dear Saturn, hear my praise.
I think your mags are swell.
I'll bless you with my dying breath,
From out my padded cell!

—*1290 Alma Street, Beaumont, Texas.*

Well, when we get one of these there is only one thing to do. So. . . .

Though Saturn in the heavens slowly fades
And wraps his rings about him in the gloom,
Your editor his personal'ty trades
And sweeps with that proverbial new broom.

The Xeno vats lie empty in the hold.
Untended by the loving hands of yore,
The old space lingo's covered now with mold
And Snaggle's tooth is powdered on the floor.

Yet although Froggie's monstrous glowing orbs
No longer roll with interest toward the light,
And Wart-ears' orifice no more absorbs
Spare Xeno, yet the System's still all right,

For when not eyeing Bergey's maidens' stems
Your editor must still confess to a certain lurking liking
For those impossible creatures known as BEMS!

Which should be about enough of that, Evangeline, unless the Cajun demands another poetic inburst.

TAKE COUVER
By John Van Couvering

Finding myself with a copy of the December ish in one hand, a typewriter near the other, and many thoughts of criticism and congratulations in this poor head, I chose the obvious course and decided to tell you what's what in the December TWS.

The cover was exceptionally good, but then Bergey did it, and, as you said, he can really draw! Best of all, there wasn't a mistake on the whole cover.

I AM EDEN was another of Kuttner's very good fantasy-STFiction stories.

THE END is the "pocket universes" in a future age, eh? This isn't The End of the series, is it? I really hope not.

GRIM RENDEZVOUS. Bah! Zagat is good, yes, but not on shorts. Keep him busy on a good novel or novelet and he won't do it any more. I hope.

THE GHOSTS OF MELVIN PYE. What have we here? De Camp? This is too good to be true! And what a story! I don't know if it's fantast or STF, and what's more I don't care. Whoopeee!

PHALID'S FATE was even past Vance's previous efforts, and that's really good.

PARDON MY MISTAKE had a decidedly mediocre twist, due mainly to the fact that the story was sorta pore and sickly. Came as a surprise, anyhow. But that's all.

Another story with a twist is **LIFE ON THE MOON**, but it's infinitely better, both in style and handling. I like that twist, too. Very neat.

The Reader Speaks is filled mainly with fellows who wouldn't get printed otherwise except they're too dumb to be funny, or too smart. So you print 'em. Then there are the guys who are funny enough to be printed anyhow, and who can also say something. First goes to Oliver (who else), second goes to Ron Anger, and third goes to Sneary, who has many ideas but is a very poor speller. Why don't you rewrite the whole letter while you're at it? Thanks for printing it—he ISN'T trying to be funny.—*902 North Downey Avenue, Downey, California.*

Well, anyway, it wasn't in poetry.

NOT IN HEAT, BUT IN ANGER
By Ron Anger

In my humble opinion you have no peer in the editor department and I, for one, would like to know your real name, see your picture (*real* picture) etc. The fans get a lot of enjoyment out of your writings and now that things are on a more . . . shall we say . . . serious plane it would not be amiss to give us your real name at the same time keeping the Sarge title for old times' sake.

Seeing that you don't want us fans to tell you how horrible the blurb laughingly called the cover is there is only one thing left: And whereas said blurb appears on the Dec. ish and whereas December is the last ish of TWS to be dated 1946 it is therefor the decision of this letter-hack to list the

Favourite Yarns of '46 in TWS

Rocket Skin—By Ray Bradbury, short, Spring TWS.
Dead City—By Murray Leinster, novelet, Summer.
Call Him Demon—By Keith Hammond, novelet, Fall.
Phalid's Fate—By Jack Vance, novelet, Dec.

You will have observed that I have used the somewhat arbitrary but on the whole reliable system of naming my favourite story from each issue without trying to rate them any finer. Other data are that no novel made the top four and that no author had two stories in them.

These are by no means the only fine stories you have given us, however, and my "place" list follows:

Battle of the Brains by Jerry Shelton, *Zero* by Noel Loomis, *Pocket Universes* by Murray Leinster and *The End* by Murray Leinster.

Samuel Mines, Charles F. Ksanda, Henry Kuttner, Arthur Leo Zagat also did excellent work for you in '46 and there were numerous others which were probably just as deserving of mention.

It has been a good year for TWS in the story department and may they always be as good!

I have a coupla bones to pick with two of the authors, however, thusly:

Murray Leinster—How come the light from the 2nd Galaxy would reach Earth only *after* the collision had taken place?

Alexander Samalman—Granting that science fiction must adhere to scientific theory or else explain *why* it deviates, there could be no liquid mud on the surface of the Moon.—*520 Highland Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario.*

Well now, isn't that sweet! As for the ex-Sarge giving his real name he is, believe it or not, officially tongue-tied and for very good reasons not to be listed here. As for his real picture, you'll live a longer, better, happier life without exposure to same.

Your choice of "bests" was interesting—especially in view of the Herculean efforts that have been going on hereabouts for some time to lift the level of our short stories and novelets. Now it looks as if the longer job needs shoring up. Oh, well. . . .

As to your "coupla bones" to pick, Leinster seems to have fled town at this writing and cannot be reached. And re the matter of liquid mud on the moon, Alexander Samal-

[*Turn page*]

man claims it was caused by the usual author's sweat—to say nothing of proofreader remissness.

LIGHTS—CAMERA—AND ACTION!
By Rodney Palmer

I am sorry to see that Thrilling Wonder is going high-class. Instead of being a first-class Pulp it has graduated (?) into a third class slick. The editors apparently have only a very vague idea what their readers want.

If I were editor of a science-fiction mag, here's what I'd do—first I would call up on the carpet all the old-line writers who'd gone literary, would tell them to turn out professionally entertaining work—of which they are all capable—or else. Then the big names would be called in—Manly Wade Wellman, Edmond Hamilton, Joseph J. Millard, Robert Moore Williams (what's the matter with these boys?)

A story for my mag wouldn't lean heavily either in the direction of blundering action or Tired Writing. A well written story would be one embracing a clever plot, plenty of scientific patter—and to balance off the patter an equal paragraph of fast action.

The best example of a good story I can bring to mind is BATTLE OF THE BRAINS by Jerry Shelton. There was science at its best—and plenty of action to give a swift pace. Stories like POCKET UNIVERSES and CALL HIM DEMON (which are no more than thickly padded attempt at Literatoor) would be instantly and forever outlawed.

In conclusion, a suggestion: Let the trend swing back to what science-fiction lovers really want: A story heavy with science BUT FOR EVERY PARAGRAPH OF SCIENTIFIC PATTER AN EQUAL PARAGRAPH OF ACTION FOR BALANCE!—*226 West 60th Street, Chicago 21, Illinois.*

And why not fold in a couple of whites of egg beaten stiff and top with a dusting of grated nutmeg. Stories are not manufactured in drug stores, in spite of comment to the contrary. A paragraph of this for a paragraph of that indeed! Maybe the literate Mr. Palmer should read Thomas Hardy instead of Oliver. He might discover a little something about the wellsprings of human behavior, to say nothing of real fiction. Next, please. . . .

ANOTHER ANNUAL LISTING
By Warren D. Rayle

The occasion for this letter is the December TWS, which should inspire more eloquent tongues than mine. Typewriters may prove more difficult to inspire.

My judgment as to the merits of the issue is: I Am Eden—Kuttner; Phalid's Fate—Vance; good. The End—Leinster; and The Ghosts of Melvin Pye—de Camp; passable. I say no more.

The Story Behind the Story is a department well worth enlarging.

The Reader Speaks is usually at least as interesting as the stories. However, it seems that the only thing fans write about is the magazine itself. Why not a scholarly discussion of some science-fiction gadgets, for a change?

I haven't heard anyone suggest that maybe cosmic rays are the result of space-ship drives. It could be, for example, a highly developed betatron, or other electron accelerator, running off atomic power, and proceeding by the reaction of a jet of near-light-speed electrons. I fully realize that it would have to be a *highly developed* betatron, to give a useful reaction.—*663 East 107th Street, Cleveland 8, Ohio.*

We'll do our best with TSBTS department as suggested. But trying to get these fellers to write extra wordage once their checks are

paid is like trying to extract an appendix out of doors on a rainy night with a toothpick.

As for your cosmic ray theory, we make no comment. Our legs are long enough now without risking further stretching to cause discomfort while riding atop a Fifth Avenue bus.

ALLSTARS
By John Walsh

This letter is going to be short and to the point. First of all, congratulations to Henry Kuttner for his superb story "I Am Eden."

Year's rating for TWS follows:

1. I Am Eden . . . Henry Kuttner.
2. Call Him Demon . . . Keith Hammond. Here was a treat for fantasy lovers. The best of its type since "The Devil's Fiddle."
3. Pocket Universes . . . Murray Leinster. The End . . . Murray Leinster. A couple of really fine tales, original and well-written.
4. The Multillionth Chance . . . John Russell Fearn. Though not as good as "Aftermath," this was still an interesting and capable work.
5. Dead City . . . Murray Leinster. Again ML comes through—with one of the best Time Travel Tales I've read. Much more Murray.

The art department was enlivened by Finlay and Stevens and by Marchioni, in a negative sense of course. The Reader Speaks was vastly improved by the exclusion of space dialect. All in all, a fair year which improved toward the end. But as far as stories go, you didn't approach last year's "Sword of Tomorrow."

And now I've got an idea that should start some discussions in TWS. Let's have every fan write in his ten favorite stf yarns, with appropriate comments. I'll start the ball rolling with mine.

1. Ark of Fire, by John Hawkins. For sheer, stirring power and great characterization, this is my favorite of them all.
2. World of A, by A. E. Van Vogt. Science-fiction has produced few finer tales than this one of a befuddled superman in a world of logic. I haven't read "Slan!", but . . .
3. The Ship of Ishtar, by A. Merritt. Try as I might, I couldn't keep this, my favorite fantasy, off this list.
4. The Skylark of Space, by E. E. Smith. Despite nauseous dialogue, the famous "Skylark" is my king of interplanetics.
5. The Impossible World, by Eando Binder. This tremendous story of aliens appeared 'way back in Startling's second issue. Those were the days . . .
6. Rebirth, by Thomas C. McClary.
7. Before the Dawn, by John Taine. Here is stf that IS stf!
8. A Martian Odyssey, by Stanley G. Weinbaum. 'Nuff said.
9. The Shadow out of Time, by H. P. Lovecraft. There was only one Lovecraft, there'll never be another.
10. Universe, by Robert Heinlein.

I see that with every word I write, I'm contradicting the first line of this letter so I'd better quit.—*154 North Main Street, St. Albans, Vermont.*

No beefs, John, except on the aforementioned SKYLARK OF SPACE. On which, pfui!

HE AIN'T EDEN
By Norm Storer

Cover: rather nice. The dark sky is a change, at least, and even Bergey's babe seems to be in better health and wardrobe this ish.

Stories: top place, of course, goes to Leinster's "END." Really swell. As good as the superb "DEAD CITY," if not better.

Kuttner is not far behind with his "I AM EDEN." Sounds like a re-hash of the recent SS novel, "VALLEY OF THE FLAME," but a good deal better.

[*Turn page*]

The rest of the stories are not classics by any matter of means, but neither are they half bad. I guess de Camp's "GHOST" leads them, with all the rest following in no particular order.

A special word of praise for Vance. In his second (am I right in that?) STF story, he has certainly outdone his "WORLD-THINKER." More of his work will be appreciated.

Pics: ouch! Having all of the mag illustrated by Marchioni isn't my idea of the best way to sell it. Where is that Stevens man?

Letters: Ah Chad. (or did I say that before?) You are divine. Practically. All that plug for "friend Norman Storer" will not go unheeded. The rest of the letters are all good. Put me down fellers, don't be so affectionate.

One more little word and I'm on my way. I was sorry at first to hear of Ye Sarge's arrival on the wagon, but as time goes on, I see some of the ol' humor still in there, so I don't feel too bad.—*1724 Miss. Street, Lawrence, Kansas.*

Who's this Sarge you speak of in such familiar fashion? A non-commissioned BEM, maybe?

ON TRIAL IN MONTREAL

By George F. White

Your article on space travel and its implications was extremely interesting and I hope you give us more of the same sometime in the near future. I heartily agree with your suggestion that the letters from fans should contain something more than just story ratings. Discussions and arguments between fans on scientific subjects and other matters pertaining to Science Fiction would prove to be very interesting.

On the whole the December issue was below par with the two novelets outrating everything else. They were excellent: however here is my rating of the issue.

I AM EDEN, an excellent piece of work for those who like this type of story.

PHALID'S FATE, very good: the transplanting of someone's brain has always interested me. The description of Wratch's reactions to the impressions of an alien body was well done.

THE END, Leinster's sequel to Pocket Universes is excellent. His handling of the expanding universe theory is impressive. Murray Leinster seems very well informed on matters pertaining to astronomy and physics and he is consistently the best in my estimation.

As for the short stories they are not worth mentioning. Why the ghost story in a S.F. magazine, Sarge?

Earle Bergey is a top notch artist: his technique is excellent, and his girls put him in a class with Varga and Petty. Earle's conception of a space ship is poor. His craft are usually too cluttered up with unnecessary fins, tubes, windows, etc. A space ship is essentially a projectile so let it remain as such.—*7922 St. Gerard Street, Montreal 10, P. Q.*

Well, Bergey will be elated about this. And after all, every man is entitled to his own view of space ships until he is confronted with the real thing. What you hear boiling is our short story writers.

THIS ONE IS SILLY

By Edwin Sigler

Well, if you want us to talk about something other than the stories you print, I will oblige. In the stories you have published the space ships do all their fighting with ray cannon.

I hold that we would not have to devise a single new weapon to enable a ship to protect itself from pirates or any other hostile ship. The only serious problem would be the recoil and that has been done away with as a direct result of this last war.

Let us assume that two ships meet in open space, one a pirate vessel, the other an American destroyer —the spatial equivalent of an earthly tin-can as they are sometimes called.

Radar will pick up the pirate vessel at perhaps a hundred miles and they swing around in pursuit. Since it is unlikely that the pirate craft could escape they are forced to join battle.

Closing in, the destroyer opens fire at perhaps fifty miles. Using the fire-control developed for the big Boeing bombers, the gunners swing their guns around and firing out through pressure gaskets let the criminals have a long drag from each of several heavy Brownings while the ship is kicked out of the path of any return fire. Such a salvo might last as long as a minute and as a Browning fires at the rate of fifteen hundred per would result in several thousand or so armor-piercing slugs streaming across space.

Since they would leave no track in the airless void the pirates have no way of telling where they are going and don't swerve out of the line of fire in time . . . — *1328 North Market, Wichita, Kansas.*

There was a lot more of this, but we've had enough. If the pirate ship couldn't see the 50-calibers coming, neither could the space destroyer see how close they were getting. And would tracer burn without air. Incidentally, if it took a 90-millimeter shell to pierce tank armor in 1945, how would a mere machine-gun pierce space-ship armor? And if. . . . But let's stop right now. Madness lies immediately ahead.

THAT PLACE IN KANSAS AGAIN
By Alan Jones

I see TWS has reverted to type in its covers. And it was supposed to be cold on that old Earth, too. Tell Bergey to find some color besides red for his male space-suits.

Well, anyway, to get to that thing which good letter-writers never do—rating the stories.

The End . . . About 9 jugs. It was pretty good, but not nearly as good as "Pocket Universes." There could be a sequel to "The End," too. I hope the sequel to "The D. Circuit" is as good as the original.

Phalid's Fate . . . Vance is darn good for a newcomer, even good for an old hand at STF. 7 jugs.

I Am Eden . . . Just a rehash of Valley of the Flame, but pretty good. 6 jugs.

Grim Rendezvous . . . Fair. 5 jugs. An interesting theory in it.

The other three were just filler. About a half a Martini apiece. Made with kerosene.

That was a good editorial, Sarge. I'm glad to see you take a real, non-cynical view of something.

Why don't you get Stevens or Finlay back to do your drawing? Marchioni just can't draw, Sarge! And you let him do the whole darn ish, too!—*1242 Prairie, Lawrence, Kansas.*

All male space suits are red flannel during the winter months. That is the law, Jonesy. Poor Marchioni. I knew him, Horatio.

MORE RATINGS
By Rex E. Ward

Before giving my personal opinion of the latest issue, let me explain *my* new rating system:

A story is rated on six qualities: "narrative hook," originality of plot, characterization, style, description, and the ending, in that order. Seven points for each quality is the highest score possible. Once the total number of points has been obtained, the sum is divided by forty-two, thus giving the story's final percentage. So:

(1) The Ghosts of Melvin Pye, by L. Sprague de Camp. 6-6-6-5-5-5, percentage: .76.

(2) I Am Eden, by Henry Kuttner. 6-5-5-4-5-5, percentage: .71.

(3) The End, by Murray Leinster. 3-5-5-4-4-5, percentage: .63.

(4) Pardon My Mistake, by Fletcher Pratt. 3-2-4-6-5-5, percentage: .58.

(5) Grim Rendezvous, by Arthur Leo Zagat. 4-4-3-5-3-2, percentage: .50.

[*Turn page*]

Life on the Moon and Phalid's Fate came in with .32 and .19, respectively. The magazine averaged a .53.

And now a few well-meaning suggestions:

Drop the name "Sergeant Saturn"; in this day and age it just doesn't fit. A cover by Virgil Finlay, if possible. Trim the edges. Give us a picture of Earle Bergey; I like his work, even if a lot of other fans don't. And, last but not least, *revive Captain Future* magazine!—*428 Main, El Segundo, California.*

What a system! We personally subtract the total of vowels from the total of consonants, multiply by the syllable count of the longest adverb and divide by 3.1416. It comes out very close to your count, Rex.

As for your suggestions—again, who's this Saturn? We prefer Bergey to Finlay on covers (quiet out there!). Incidentally, Bergey will not pose except in red flannels and he says they itch so he won't put them on. Okay? Fate of the Cap is left to the Future.

BROWN STUDY

By Guerry Campbell Brown

What do you know, a good Bergey cover. "Kuttner's 'I am Eden' was typically good stf. The same with "The End," and "Phalid's Fate."

The short stories were not particularly good, except for Samalman's "Life on the Moon."

And what's this I read in the first part of TWS—, —all the praise and discussion about rocket travel? Certainly, I'm interested in the future of rocket travel, and all that, but isn't this the same Sarge who only a few months ago was panning the amateur rocket societys? Or did that policy go out with the Xeno? I hope so.—*Delray Beach, Florida.*

Yes, it's the same—er—writer. But we were panning the early issues of the society magazine and what looked then like a very rackety price for some. A check of recent Fanzine Reviews in our companion magazine, STARTLING STORIES, will reveal that we have long since swung into the ranks of Glen Ellyn rooters. If this is disturbing, remember we are not a fixed star.

SHRILL SMALL VOICE

By Patti J. Bowling

According to your comment on page 100, I quote, "Not a letter from a femme fan in a singularly mountainous pile of mail this time out." Well, *I'm* a fem . . . Ooooh what I almost said! I'm not one of Bergey's BEM'S, for sure. Of course, maybe you're not to blame on account of how I signed the letters.

Now, on to the December issue of TWS. I liked it very, very much. I have only one criticism, that is, MARCHIONI!!

I AM EDEN by Henry Kuttner was excellent. I'm much interested in learning more about the characters. How did Dr. Cairns' or Jacklyn's daughter finally readjust, and did she and Ferguson fall in love, etc? Frankly, I believe it would make a swell story to begin where this one stops and tell all these things.

The two novelets and the four short stories were also excellent. As for the features, good as ever if not better. The only kick I have against TWS is the fact that the letters are published so long after the story actually appears.

Oh, I meant to mention THE END. I was very agreeably surprised when I read it. In a letter which *wasn't* published I suggested that Leinster write a sequel to his POCKET UNIVERSES.

You, as well as a number of writers to the TWS, keep urging that we write in about controversial matters

and start a good discussion, so here goes. I've read hundreds and hundreds of stf and fantasy, etc., and the thing that always strikes me as being unsound is the fact that the authors never envision a change in the psychology of human beings.

This seems completely haywire to me. Vance in his PHALID'S FATE touched on this different psychology, touched on, I say, not grasped. Why must all conflict in stf revolve around greed, conquest, jealousy, all the baser human emotions? Why not imagine that a thousand years or more from now every human from birth is conditioned, psychologically, to live ethical, logical lives for the betterment of themselves and each other?—*137 Eads Avenue, San Antonia 4, Texas.*

You should have given us a hint as to gender, Patti, before sounding off. So you want a sequel to I AM EDEN. Well, we'll ask, Kuttner, but he's pretty well tied up just now. At least we were in there with THE END by Leinster.

On your suggestion about improved humans to come—bravo, and by all means. But let's make it a hundred thousand, not a thousand years, shall we? There are too many BEMs still around, as a glimpse at any newspaper front page will reveal. It's going to take a long, long time.

SEEING RED
By Lin Carter

It is seldom that I pick up a copy of a prozine and enjoy it as much as I did your Dec. ish. That was, if you ask me, just about the best ish of TWS I have ever had the pleasure to read!

The cover was really amazing—or should I say "thrilling"? Imagine! The femme has (get this, now) —not a tin bra and scanties—but long *underwear!* Gad, revolutionary, wot? And *no Bem*—except one clutching in the air. Tell me, Sarge, *why* must the hero *always* have on a red football uniform and brown shoulder pads and red hair? Is that the convential stef hero, or is that what The Great Bergey looks like?

I Am Eden by Hank Kuttner is one of the best yarns I've read all year! Even better than *Sword* and *Dark World.*

Phalid's Fate cops first place in the shorts this time. Very, *very* good. Reminded me slightly of Dr. Smith's *Grey Lensman.*

Grim Rendezvous and *The End* are next. Both were super (to coin a phrase). Leinster developed his "pocket universe" idea excellently, although I still don't get it . . .

The other shorts were all good. De Camp's and Samalman's little hunks o' humor were duly appreciated by yours truly. Some fans will undoubtedly jump on you for that de Camp short but not me . . .

THE READER BABBLES was pretty good this time—*865—20th Ave. So., St. Petersburg, 6, Florida.*

There is a rumor afloat that Bergey's mother was frightened by the underwear color section of an old-fashioned Sears Roebuck catalogue. Hmmm—could be.

PANNED FROM ONTARIO
By Kenneth M. Smookler

Not to mince words I would like to open with the most usual item in a fan letter—panning.

To begin with, the short stories included two mediocre, but not too bad, numbers—namely, "Pardon My Mistake," and "Life on the Moon." The first of these, by the way, illustrates a common error which keeps many science-fiction stories from being classed among the great; that is, taking a common, rather trite non-stf

[*Turn page*]

plot and then twisting stf to fit the plot rather than the other way round.

In trying to classify the novelets and place one above the other I find myself blocked. "The End" was, of course, more of an original plot, but "Phalid's Fate" took a not-yet-hackneyed plot and treated so well of detail that it ranks with "The End."

The novel was good though a bit too much fantasy for my tastes. Kuttner seems to delight in hovering just on the edge of fantasy while seeming to be a modernistic author. "Sword of Tomorrow" impressed me as being the same sort of semi-stf, semi-fantasy novel. Kuttner is good but I think he should either write stf or write for a fantasy mag.

Stf stories have been written which mention the existence on various other solar system planets of material life (as opposed to pure-energy life-forms). My argument is that it is impossible on all planets but Mars, Earth, and Venus. If anyone feels disposed to accept my flung gauntlet I have some answers to almost any arguments against my pet theory.—*1445 Victoria Avenue, Windsor, Ontario.*

Let's step into another Solar System, if you please, and see what turns up. Maybe Bergey isn't so far from the mark at that.

NOTE FROM A VETERAN READER

By George Ford Jr.

My first and probably my last letter as a science-fiction fan—but the "Reader Speaks" seems to be your most popular feature, so here goes nothing.

I know the fatal tendency of old time fans to compare present science fiction with that of the "good old days," usually to the detriment of our current crop of stories, and I would like to avoid that pitfall. But in all truth—they have a point at that. After re-reading some of the stuff turned out in the said "good old days" will have to admit the authors waited till they had something to write about, and then did their best to turn out a good readable, logical story. Nowadays they seem to be more concerned with turning out the "mostest" production with the "leastest" effort—mentally that is—and as a consequence we have enough pot-boilers to equip a Salvation Army soup kitchen.

In your present issue I found one good story. "The End" by Murray Leinster. I believe he did a much better job than Henry Kuttner with his "I Am Eden." The latter plot, if you can call it that, might have been better sold to one of the comic magazines. I refuse to believe that the I.Q. of the average science-fiction fan is that of a 6 year old.—*1595 Spruce St., Denver, Colo.*

After trying to dig out enough old-timers to keep the STARTLING STORIES Hall of Fame alive, your reporter must enter a hearty dissent as to the STF of fifteen-twenty years ago. Here and there, of course, are classics or semi-classics that have stood up under the test of time and changing fashions.

But they are no more frequent in STF than in any other story form—perhaps less so, due to low prices paid authors in comparison to other types of fiction and so on. Here and there classics and near-classics are still being produced—even, occasionally in TWS and SS. The only test is time, and most of the oldies are moldies.

NEOPHYTE

By Lois Kraus

I haven't been reading TWS very long, but I'm beginning to wonder if girls are prohibited in your column. I just finished reading your December issue, which for once has a cover I don't stick in my pocket lest I be arrested.

This issue is terrif, but def! That is all except I

AM EDEN. When I finished reading that all I could say was—SO WHAT?—*7233 Tapper Avenue, Hamond, Indiana.*

That's dif, Lois, but def yourself. Incidentally, this lopping-off of words brought into prominence by the bar gal in the movie version of THE LOST WEEKEND is not new. It was nicely satirized back in 1926 or 1927 by a song entitled A SUNNY DISPOSISH in the Broadway revue AMERICANA. Somebody ought to dig it up as it said it all.

FASTER THAN LIGHT
By Wallace Weber

Having finished off all the stories in the December issue of TWS, (that's a swell spaceship on the cover) I have concluded that Murray Leinster almost rivals Chad Oliver as far as writing ability is concerned. I got a bang out of "Life on the Moon" although I didn't care for the way the author wrote it.

Say, Sarge, I got me a problem. There has been an ugly rumor buzzing around that nothing can go faster than light. Now if you know anyone who believes it, ask him to explain to me what happens in the following situation.

Planet A is heading for planet B at the rather speedy velocity of ½ light speed. (To simplify things, I am considering planet B stationary.) A Xeno-powered spaceship, S, can attain a velocity of ¾ light speed. Now what I want to know is, what happens to the spaceship if it takes off from planet A bound for planet B? If it goes ¾ light speed in the same direction the planet is going, the ship is tearing along at 1¼ light speeds in relation to planet B. If you can get me an

[*Turn page*]

answer to my problem, I'll smuggle a jug of that rocket fuel into your cage.—*Box 585, Ritzville, Washington.*

No rocket fuel for us, Wallace. Maybe some of you wizards in the audience can handle this one We're too tired—and too dumb.

BERGEY REPLACES BEMS
By Ron Garth

I swam through the December TWS from cover to cover and here is my last will and testament. To:

THE END I leave—10,000,000 credits. It was good in detail and plot but that cover (?) floored me.

PHALID'S FATE—5,000,000 credits. Kind of weak in the plot but the impressions were terrific.

I AM EDEN—1,000,000 credits and a copy of Darwin's works. (The deluxe edition in genuine ape skin.)

LIFE ON THE MOON—5,000 credits and my laughter.

GRIM RENDEZVOUS—One counterfeit credit and I am not sure it is worth that.

THE GHOSTS OF MELVIN PYE—One picture of me in a beautiful lead frame.

PARDON MY MISTAKE—He owes me something for this!!! I've read better in comics.

Tell Mr. Bergey that he has replaced the Bems with C.C.M.'s (Cat clawed monsters).

Since I have little time left I will attack the impregnable things known as "The Readers." Mr. Halibut, I firmly believe that every first letter that has ever been written opened with the phrase "I have broken my life long pledge of never writing to....." ad infinitum.

Thank goodness for readers such as Mr. Ralph D. Comer. He knows what he has to say and says it without too much goo.—*412 Cleveland Drive, Lido Key, Sarasota, Florida.*

Okay, Ron, that's your opinion. Take it away. . . .

MORE CANADIAN CAPERS
By Greg Cranston

Though I have read two years of TWS, this is the first ish which has not caught me with my typewriter in hock. The mag is improving constantly, and has reached, in my estimation, the top of the science-fiction field.

Ye December Ish

Running first, and paying .82. is PHALID'S FATE, which was good because of the comparisons of vision, and the hero's courage. Place, at .78, is I AM EDEN, which is a most entertaining combination of phantasy, mythology and ultra-science. Show, at .75, is THE END, which is a fine story by a fine author, and a sequel that demands a sequel. More of the same.

Trailing by a length is THE GHOSTS OF MELVIN PYE, at .61, which is intriguing, and something different. Next is GRIM RENDEZVOUS, with .50. Would have been better if the hero had died, and the heroine had married the general. LIFE ON THE MOON, with .15, was hack. Last with .06. is PARDON MY MISTAKE. The title was admirably appropriate.

Marchioni is improving, but does he have to do the whole mag? The cover stunk. THE READER SPEAKS WAS GOOD. Ye Sarge's little prophecy was stirring. I have often wondered, now that ye Sarge has climbed on the wagon, if TWS might become a chronicle of ultra-science, with technical narratives written in algebra, instead of delightful little fairy tales. Don't do it. —*184 Glen Road, Hamilton, Ontario.*

What's happening in Canada? Our sister Commonwealth to the north is turning into

a veritable hive of fanactivity lately. Will someone please elucidate anent same? We shall be glad to give him space.

HOW ABOUT A CUP OF TEA?
By S. Vernon McDaniel

Since you seem to want thoughts on subjects dear to Stf hearts, I give you these, sensible or not sensible.

It has been in my mind for a long time that spaceships could be run on water. As all of you more or less witty fens know, Hydrogen burns with a violent explosion when mixed with Oxygen and Ignited. And it is also known that water is made of two parts Hydrogen and one part Oxygen, which can be separated by many methods, the simplest of which is the electrolysis of water.

You know, where a cathode and an anode are stuck into some water and Hydrogen bubbles off of one and Oxygen off the other. Now when Hydrogen burns in Oxygen it burns to produce water again. A space-ship could have two vertical fins, protruding from the top and bottom of the ship, which would gather in the sun's energy like giant photo-electric cells, and transform that energy into electricity. Then the Electricity thus gained could be used to break up a sizeable amount of distilled water into its component parts, which could then be ignited by the same electricity, and exploded in a combustion chamber to propel the ship.

Then, as the two elements form water all over again, the water thus formed could be returned to the fuel tank, with a small loss, I suppose, and used over again. This borders on perpetual motion. When flying on the dark side of a planet it could run on auxilliary batteries.—*816 Soledad Avenue, Santa Barbara, Calif.*

It's an idea, S. Naturally anything that runs on water would need fins, too. And as long as hydrogen sulphide wasn't the result, everyone on board should be reasonably comfortable, other factors being equal. Let's hear some sane answers from some of you scientific-minded readers.

CHEER FROM SNEARY
By Rick Sneary

That was a most interesting editorial you had in dear old TWS this time. It really looks as if you might be reforming. Well while you're in a good mood let me tell you a couple things. California is not going to be left out of the future in the stars. The UCLA is offering a class in space navigation this year, with a well known astronomer as teacher. No fooling!

Another thing—we have our own Pacific Coast Rocket Society, which is working on rocket motors and hopes to be one of the first to be able to use Atomic Power when and if it is released to the public. So on one side we see men planning rockets, and on the other men training to fly them. California was our "last frontier," it may well be our last stop before space. How about hearing what the other states are doing?

And now for the Dec. TWS. And on the cover we find the girl from the SS's "Valley of the Flame" Cover, along with Cap. Footure.

So you like the way I rate stories. QS, I'll do it again. Stories are in order of preference, with points for (in order) plausibility, characterization and style. (I'm using your words. They are better than mine.) They rate 10.00, nothing wrong. 5.00, Just so-so. .00, Gaaaagh!

1. GRIM RENDEZVOUS	4.00	8.30	8.00
2. PHALID'S FATE	3.45	6.75	7.75
3. THE END	3.75	7.50	8.60
4. I AM EDEN	1.00¼	4.00	9.25
5. THE GHOSTS OF MELVIN PYE	1.00	7.80	8.50
6. PARDON MY MISTAKE	6.50	4.75	3.80
7. LIFE ON THE MOON	3.00	3.75	4.50

The Reader Speaks was about average. Even with my letter it wasn't outstanding. But then this change

[*Turn page*]

over from fun to peace is throwing a few of the boys off stride.—*2962 Santa Ana St., South Gate, Calif.*

Okay, Rick. Your stuff about rockets in California is intriguing. And we would like to hear more about the subject from any locality where such activity is in progress.

FINAL RATING
By Ben Singer

After nosing through the December ish of TWS, I came accross something good. (Not that that's unusual in WONDER.) That something was "The End." Leinster's masterpiece was the highlight of the issue.

In second place was "Phalid's Fate." Though the plot wasn't new, it was treated in a different manner. Usually the hero in this type of story is a robot. Jack Vance (Has he any other names?) is a rising author, and when he gets to the top, I'm sure he'll stay.

I see you have a couple of old-timers writing for you again. I can remember A. Leo Zagat and Fletcher Pratt from way back in the early thirties. I hope they are as successful in the future as in the past. Zagat's story was pretty good, though Pratt's was under par.

You represent yourself as being a science-fiction magazine. After reading "The Ghosts of Melvin Pye" I wonder. Since when do stf magazines run ghost stories?

"Life on the Moon" wasn't too bad. Most authors write of the moon as "airless and lifeless" though it is refreshing to read something different.

I didn't care for Kuttner's novel. In fact I don't like most of his fantasy. He writes some good science-fiction though.

All in all it was pretty good ish, Sarge, except for the *ghost* and the Kuttner yarn I could of graded it excellent.—*3242 Monterey, Detroit 6, Michigan.*

Okay, Ben, and that's that for this issue. STF magazines run ghost stories as of our December, 1946, issue, and that is that. You evidently missed the point of Smalaman's Moon story. The "life" was a Martian on the same errand as the Tellurian hero. Oh, well, let it go. . . .

Nice crop of letters, people. It was fun reading them and selecting those printed above. Let's have an even better crop next time. The Sar. . . .your editor is ready and waiting. Adios.

—THE EDITOR.

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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

WELL, the boys were in early this issue with their explanations, halting or otherwise, of how they got that way. For, more than in any other form of fiction, pseudo-science demands an idea upon which

to build—it cannot exist acceptably merely upon characterization, situation and mood, though all three of these frequently vital story hormones are important in scientifiction.

Henry Kuttner, whose WAY OF THE GODS does so much to make this edition of TWS a memorable one, has been for some time preoccupied with the possibilities of mutation—a not unreasonable premise, what with atomic bombs and dust and cosmic rays about to be released upon a reluctant world.

At any rate, a problem in this subject popped into his head and the result—since Mr. Kuttner is very talented and a born story teller—is WAY OF THE GODS. Here is how it came about, in its author's own words:

If you've got a normal man you've got a monster. The norm is purely an arbitrary symbol. "Mr. Average Citizen" doesn't exist in reality. He's a handy semantic term, that's all. You could have one man in the world with two heads, and one with no head, the norm wouldn't alter at all—the balance would still be there.

What with secondary radiations and certain uranium byproducts—such as atomic bombs—it's quite possible that forced mutations have already been born, after Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the New Mexico experiments. Generally speaking, if an embryo is too freakish, it won't be viable. It won't reach full term—laws of natural selection simply erase the biological mistake that has been made. But some of these mutants may be born, and they may live.

Anything can happen then.

The human germ-plasm is capable of Incredible variations. Look at freak shows. Look at anthropological history. Teratology isn't unknown to medicine. Some mighty odd specimens have lived and reached maturity, and the genes and chromosomes of these specimens weren't bombarded with radioactivity before conception took place.

We may get some odder specimens from now on.

In the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king. Sure—but in the country of the one-eyed the one-eyed man is *normal*. Take a group of mutated freaks—

[*Turn page*]

freaks by our standards, variants from our arbitrary norm. They're monsters. *Unless* you find an environment where such types are the rule rather than the exception.

The idea intrigued me. Thus—

WAY OF THE GODS. Hope you like it!

We do, Henry, we do. WAY OF THE GODS struck us between the intellectual eyes at first reading with its brilliance and variation from the orthodox in fiction.

And now George O. Smith rings in with an explanation of how he incorporated a legendary but far too currently evident figure of demi-cosmic fun named K-lr-y into the ubiquitous Jordan Green of QUEST TO CENTAURUS, whose interplanetary capers are not at all what they seem.

Come to think of it his explanation had better be good. So:

Being very honest about it, the tale of Jordan Green is based, as the character in the story said it was—"In World War One it was 'Where's Elmer?' and in World War Two it was Kilroy."

Throughout the legends of civilization there appear everlastingly the names of famous travelers whose ability to go where the foot of man never trod before is the one factor that keeps the name fresh in the memory.

Whether Homer was oft confronted with the Grecian equivalent of "Odysseus, King of Ithaca, was here," will probably never be known. Well, if that was good enough for Homer to start an epic on, it is good enough for George O. Smith.

At any rate, a group of us were on the Baltimore and Ohio between the home office and one of the most restricted of the war laboratories when the first tales of the now-famous Kilroy started to filter through.

On the wall of the Pullman car were scrawled, boldly and with a proud flourish, the familiar words. This started a discussion that lasted far into the night and over many a tinkling glass of ice water.

The discussion, of course, consisted of tabulating places where Kilroy couldn't possibly have been.

We touched upon the amusement quality of the legend and we carried on at great length as to the possible psychology of the man who adds to the legend of another man's name. Not being even close to psychologists or psychiatric experts we gave up.

We left the problem lying between a "passion for anonymity" and recognition of the fact that, when Kilroy was to have been everywhere so that folks would seek his name, no one would give a hang whether Joe Zilch claimed to have been in an occasional place either first or later.

The following morning, we entered the Inner Sanctum of a laboratory where the foot of the uninitiated, unfingerprinted and unknown never had been set. In through the barred and guarded inner doors we went, being scrutinized and authorized and—

There, in the innermost chamber where the voice was reverently hushed automatically when it uttered any word pertaining to science, was the familiar scrawl—

"Kilroy gets around, doesn't he!"

Obviously no one but a group of superbeings playing jokes on the human race could have penetrated to that depth. There was one thing left to do—get it down on paper to prepare Terra for the forthcoming New Postwar Galaxy!

Which brings us to that brilliant new author, William Fitzgerald, and the why of his amazing THE GREGORY CIRCLE. And Fitzgerald's explanation is so complete that it needs no comment from this uneasy chair.

States the author:

THE GREGORY CIRCLE was suggested by a thing that happened in the Harvard Mathematics Department some years ago. A starry-eyed farm boy appeared who said that he thought he had made an important dis-

covery in mathematics, and would they look at it. All professors of mathematics are hounded by people who have squared the circle or trisected an angle, so they've learned patience, but this professor had a shock. This farm boy had made a discovery. A great discovery. One of the greatest in the history of mathematics. He had discovered logarithms.

There seems to be no doubt about it. Quite independently, without even high-school training—which would have showed them to him—he'd invented logarithms out of his own head. He was a hundred-odd years late, but having no preparation or training for the job, he had actually shown more genius than Napier, who made the discovery first.

When I heard that story I began to think of other people who have known most unlikely things without knowing how they knew. It is a matter of history that Joan of Arc knew more about placing artillery than anybody in the world before her. An Egyptian sculptor knew how to—and did—make a statue that was so lifelike that they chained its leg to keep it from walking away.

He didn't know how he knew how to do it. He couldn't teach anybody else, and no other Egyptian sculptor ever learned. (The statue still exists, and it's good.)

And two thousand years ago somebody knew, without knowing how he knew, that chaulmoogra oil would help leprosy. He didn't know how to use it—an acid ester of the oil is the trick—but he knew the fact. And away back in the B.C. days somebody mentioned in a poem that Venus—the planet—had horns like the new moon. He couldn't have told with the naked eye. He simply couldn't. He knew without knowing how he knew.

So it occurred to me that it would be interesting to do a story about a man who knew his nuclear physics without knowing how he knew. THE GREGORY CIRCLE is the result.

To me, the queerest thing about the story is the probability that there is somebody on earth right now with Bud Gregory's ability. It's entirely possible. But if there is such a man, he doesn't give a hoot or we'd know about it and be starting to build atomic motors and space-ships and a few other desirable things!

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